SPECIAL ANNIVERSARY DOUBLE ISSUE!

IENCE FICTION

APRIL/MAY 2006

### Stories by:

Paul Melko William Shunn Kristine Kathryn Rusch **Robert Silverberg** Liz Williams

Wil McCarthy R. Neube Greg van Ee hout **Mary Rosen** lum

\$5.99 U.S. / \$7.99 C



imol

# Don't Miss an Issue!

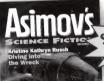
Subscribe today and have every intriguing issue of entertaining science fiction delivered direct to your door!



An unbeatable combination of stimulating fiction stories, provocative editorials, and fascinating articles, all solidly rooted in science fact. 1 year (12 issues\*), just \$32.97!

Visit www.analogsf.com -





scription. Expires 3/31/07.

UBSCRIBE TODAY!

Plus Carl Frederick Karl Schroede

C5C-NSFSLL

#### Asimov's Science Fiction

Novellas and short stories from the leading science fiction and fantasy writers. Plus, candid, no-holds-barred book reviews and guest editorials. 1 year (12 issues\*), just \$32.97!

✓ Visit www.asimovs.com

To order by charge card, call TOLL-FREE: 1-800-220-7443 (8am - 7pm EST)

or mail your name, address, order, and payment to:

Dell Magazines Direct 6 Prowitt St., Suite S • Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside U.S.A.: Add \$10 per year, per subscription for shipping and handling. All orders must be paid in U.S. funds. "We publish double issues twice a year which count as four issues toward your sub-

# MYSTERY VALUE PACK

4 magazines for just \$5.95!



Give yourself chills with our value pack of 4 best-loved issues of Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine!

You'll enjoy dozens of captivating tales from world-renowned masters of suspense and talented new writers alikeall for just \$5.95 plus shipping.

You save 50% off the regular price.

#### **DELL MAGAZINES**

Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

YES! Please send me my Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine Value Pack. I get 4 entertaining issues for just \$5.95 plus \$2 shipping and handling (\$7.95 per pack, U.S. funds). My satisfaction is fully guaranteed! My payment of \$ enclosed (AHPK04)

Name:	(Please print)	
Address:		
City:		

7.TP:

Please make checks payable to Dell Magazines Direct. Allow 8 weeks for delivery, Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Add \$4 additional shipping and handling for delivery outside the U.S.A. Offer expires 3/31/07.

# CIENCE FICTION

#### NOVELLAS

24 INCLINATION ...... WILLIAM SHUNN 176 THE WALLS OF THE UNIVERSE ..... PAUL MELKO

#### NOVEL ETTES

90 EXCEPT THE MUSIC ..... KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH 124 HOME MOVIES MARY ROSENBLUM

SHORT STORIES 59 HEISENBERG ELEMENTARY ..... WIL McCARTHY THE FINAL FLIGHT OF THE BLUE BEE ..... JAMES MAXEY 75 DATACIDE ..... STEVE BEIN HANOSZ PRIME GOES TO OLD EARTH ... ROBERT SILVERBERG 116 THE AGE OF ICE ..... LIZ WILLIAMS 146 THE OSTEOMANCER'S SON ..... GREG VAN EEKHOUT 158 NOT WORTH A CENT ...... R. NEUBE



#### APRIL/MAY 2006

Vol. 30 Nos. 4 & 5 (Whole Numbers 363 & 364)

Next Issue on Sale April 11, 2006 Cover Art by Bob Eggleton

## POETRY 13 CHOOSE . . . . . . . . . . . . . W. GREGORY STEWART 115 THE SONNET FROM HELL . . . . . . . . . . . . SUE BURKE 144 THE TREE OF LIFE DROPS PROPAGULES ..... GREG BEATTY 156 BRICK, CONCRETE, AND STEEL PEOPLE . . . . . BRUCE BOSTON ≥37 BURYING MAUD . . . . . . . . . . WILLIAM JOHN WATKINS DEPARTMENTS 4 EDITORIAL: COMING OF AGE . . . . . . . SHEILA WILLIAMS **B** REFLECTIONS: TRACKING DOWN THE ANCESTORS ...... ROBERT SILVERBERG THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS: A POSSIBLE PLANET: SF & ELECTRONIC MUSIC . . . . . . . . . BRIAN BIENIOWSKI 224 ON BOOKS: AUSSIES, BRITS, AND YANKS ... NORMAN SPINRAD **≥3B** THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR . . . . . ERWIN S. STRAUSS

Printed in CANADA



## **COMING OF AGE**

he coming-of-age story, the dramatic passage from adolescence to adulthood, is one of the thematic cornerstones of all literature. It is found in classics like David Copperfield and Emma, and it is prevalent in such popular fiction as J.G. Ballard's Empire of the Sun. Alice Sebold's The Lovely Bones. and, of course, the entire Harry Potter series Science fiction and fantasy authors are particularly evil, though, because they can heap excruciating new complications upon the trauma and angst of adoleggence

Science fiction has always been filled with stories about young people growing up while facing adversity. The Post-War years were rich ones for these tales. One of my favorites from the fifties is Robert Heinlein's *The Star Beast*, which chronicles the maturation of the beast as well as the humans around him. Rather than focus on a child, Arthur C. Clarke brings all of humanity to adulthood in his classic 1953 novel about *Childhood's End.* 

The sixties, a period of self-discovery, was also a fertile era for these tales. The most famous example from that decade must be Frank Herbert's Dune. Alexei Panshin's appropriately named Rite of Passage was published around the same time, and one of my favorites, John Wyndham's Chocky, about a boy coping with an alien telepath, came out in 1968. Harlan Ellison's tale of a young man learning how to survive in a brutal future, "A Boy

and His Dog," received the Nebula award for best novella in 1969.

Asimov's has run its share of these stories. One of our longest was a three-part serial by Robert Silverberg, The Longest Way Home (October/November 2001, December 2001, and January 2002). In this novel, the journey from boyhood to man is literal as well as metaphoric, since fifteen-year-old Joseph, heir to House Keilloran (one of the ruling human families on a distant planet), must survive an arduous trip across an unfriendly continent to reach the safety of his homeland. A wellreceived coming of age novella from Asimov's was John Kessel's 2002 tale, "Stories for Men." about a teenage boy growing up on Mars.

These examples may give the impression that these types of tales are all sagas about the rites of passage of young men, or that the complexities of the issues that arise from the journey from adolescence to adulthood are too rich and layered to be covered in under ten thousand words. But there have been a number of short stories. many of which capture the experience of girls and young women. Suzy McKee Charnas's 1989 Nebula-award-winning story "Boobs." about a teenage girl's steps toward adulthood, is not only a great story about a young woman, it is also one of the best werewolf stories I've ever read. Another short, sharp coming-of-age tale is Connie Willis's. "A Letter from the Cleary's." Like



SHEILA WILLIAMS

Editor

**BRIAN BIENIOWSKI** 

Associate Editor

**GARDNER DOZOIS** 

Contributing Editor

**MARY GRANT** 

Editorial Assistant
VICTORIA GREEN

Senior Art Director

SHIRLEY CHAN LEVI

Art Production Associate

CAROLE DIXON

Senior Production Manager

**EVIRA MATOS** 

Production Associate

ABIGAIL BROWNING

Manager Subsidiary Rights and Marketing

**BRUCE W. SHERBOW** 

Vice President of Sales and Marketing SANDY MARLOWE

Circulation Services

PETER KANTER

Publisher

**CHRISTINE BEGLEY** 

Associate Publisher

SUSAN KENDRIOSKI

Executive Director, Art and Production

JULIA McEVOY

Manager, Advertising Sales

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE

CONNIE GOON

Advertising Sales Coordinator Tel: (212) 686-7188

Fax: (212) 686-7188

(Display and Classified Advertising)

Stories from Asimov's have won 42 Hugos and 25 Nebula Awards, and our editors have received 17 Hugo Awards for Best Editor. Asimov's was also the 2001 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

Please do not send us your manuscript until you've gotten a copy of our manuscript guidelines. To obtain this, send us a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope (what stationery stores call a number 10 envelope), and a note requesting this information. Please write "manuscript guidelines" in the bottom left-hand corner of the outside envelope. The address for this and for all editorial correspondence is Asimov's Science Fiction, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. While we're always looking for new writers, please, in the interest of time-saving, find out what we're looking for, and how to prepare it, before submitting your story. "A Boy and His Dog," this 1982 Nebula winner is also a vicious tale of survival in a post-holocaust America.

There are many stories from Asimov's that show how universal the rite-of-passage experience is. In "Breathmoss," Ian R. MacLeod's 2002 Asimov's Readers' Award winning novella, the only immediate journey is one of self-discovery for Jalila, a human girl on the planet Habara. An unorthodox child in a rigid culture, she must come to terms with who she is and the role that she has chosen and must choose in a future of time dilation and space travel. (And my twelve-year-old thinks her choices are tough!) Despite a suffocating social order, Jalila finds room for growth and self-enlightenment. Eleanor Arnason does a masterful job of showing an alien coming to terms with herself and her world in the 1999 novella "Dapple." Allen M. Steele's long series of Coyote stories chronicles the coming of age of both a boy and his planet. Robert Reed does the same for a boy and the human species in his Sister Alice stories. One of the beauties of science fiction is that it is able to take the themes that are the cornerstones of human literature and extrapolate beyond the human condition.

Several months ago, we received the powerful novellas from Paul Melko and William Shunn that can be found in this issue. While these two stories were very different in tone, characters, and setting, they both share the young-man-comingof-age literary theme. A couple of months later, a wonderful big novella from William Barton showed up. Again, it has nothing in common with the first two tales except the coming-of-age theme. Of the many factors that go into pulling an issue together, the most important one is the stories that are submitted to the magazine. The double issue also provides me with the best opportunity to run novellas. Thus, mostly accidentally, a loose theme for April/May was born. It's a theme, though, that is not necessarily reflected in the other stories in the issue. To paraphrase Polonius, since there are more things in Heaven and Earth and science fiction than are dreamed of in this editorial, and since I also wanted to squeeze in a wide range of short stories and novelettes, you will have to wait until the October/November issue to discover how young men come of age in Mr Barton's tale

We welcome your letters. They should be sent to *Asimov's*, 475 Park Avenue South, Floor 11, New York, NY 10016, or e-mail to asimovs @delImagazines.com. Space and time make it impossible to print or answer all letters, but please include your mailing address even if you use e-mail. If you don't want your address printed, put it only in the heading of your letter; if you do want it printed, please put your address under your signature. We reserve the right to shorten and copy-edit letters. The email address is for editorial correspondence only—please direct all subscription inquiries to: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855.

# Tour the Universe WITH THE ANALOG SCIENCE FICTION AND FACT VALUE PACK!



Order today and enjoy an unbeatable combination of stimulating fiction stories, provocative editorials, and fascinating articles, all solidly rooted in science-fact.

You'll get five of our most popular back issues for just \$6.95 plus shipping and handling. That's a savings of 60% off the regular price!

To order, just fill out the coupon below and mail with your payment today.

**SAVE 60%** 

#### **DELL MAGAZINES**

Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

Please send me	Name:	(Please print)
my Analog Science Fiction Value Pack. I get 5 back issues for just \$6.95 plus \$2 shipping and han-	Address:	
dling (\$8.95 per pack, U.S. funds). My satisfaction is fully	City:	
guaranteed! My payment of \$ is enclosed. (AFPK05)	State:	ZIP:

Please make checks payable to Dell Magazines Direct. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders. Offer expires 3/31/07.

[CSC-NANLT]

## TRACKING DOWN THE ANCESTORS

've spent most of my professional life thinking about the future, but lately it's the past that's been on my mind-specifically, my own family tree. I know next to nothing about my ancestors. Both my mother's family and my father's came to the United States as part of that great migration of European Jews to the New World that took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: my father's family, like Isaac Asimov's, originated in Russia, and my mother's in a part of Poland that was then under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Neither of those countries kept very careful genealogical records of Jews, who were not regarded as full citizens, and many of such sketchy records as did exist were destroyed in World War II.

So what little information I have about my ancestors goes back no farther than my grandparents' generation—people born in the 1870s and 1880s. Three of my grandparents—my father's mother and both of my mother's parents—lived on into my adulthood. But my father's father died before I was born, and I didn't even know his first name until a couple of years ago, when I found it among my late father's papers while searching for my own birth certificate. Beyond that all is darkness.

Last week, spurred by some sudden genealogical curiosity, I phoned my only living relative of a previous generation—my mother's younger sister, who is now eighty-four years old—and asked her about the names of her grandparents. She

turned out to have no information about her father's side of the family, since they all stayed in Europe except for her father, my grandfather. But she was, at least, able to tell me the names of her maternal grandparents and a little bit about them. (They both died in the early 1930s, before I was born.)

That's probably about as far as my researches into the past are going to go-the Silverberg side of my ancestry will remain a mystery except for my paternal grandmother's first name, and I will know a tiny bit more, but not much, about my mother's family. Other Americans, of course, those who are descended from Western European ancestors, particularly English ones, have access to much more information. My wife Karen's stepmother, for instance, is a Mayflower descendant and a Daughter of the American Revolution; she still lives in a house that has been in her family's possession for two hundred years. On the other hand, her second husband. Karen's father, was one of those Jews brought from Europe to the New World as children who never even knew the names of their own grandparents.

Then there is my friend Hilary Benford, the sister-in-law of science-fiction writer Gregory Benford, who has compiled a Benford family tree going back to the seventeenth century. Greg and his twin brother Jim are descended from British settlers of the American South, and so their family history has been relatively easy to trace. I have a printout of it on my desk. You will be interested

# MYSTERY MAGAZINES



dead detection, nobody outdoes Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.

To introduce you to the awardwinning fiction of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, we'd like to send you a special value pack of four favorite issues for just \$5.95 plus shipping.

Special introductory offer.

To get your value pack, fill out the coupon below and mail it to us with your payment today.

#### **DELL MAGAZINES**

Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

YES! Please send me my Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine Value Pack. I get 4 back issues for just \$5.95 plus \$2 shipping and handling (\$7.95 per pack, U.S. funds). My satisfaction is fully guaranteed! My payment of \$\_\_\_ is enclosed. (EOPK04)

Name:	(Please print)	
Address:	(riesse piint)	
City:		 
State:	ZIP:	

Please make checks payable to Dell Magazines Direct. Allow 8 weeks for delivery. Magazines are back issues shipped together in one package. To keep prices low we cannot make custom orders Offer expires 3/31/07.

to know, I hope, that the ancestors of the author of the Galactic Center novels include such people as America Jefferson Benford, Alabama Nelson, Robert E. Lee Nelson, Philpott Marquis Karner, Tatum Shalisa Benford, Meantha Matilda Wabbington, Hassell Nimrod Callaway, Druid Jones, and Crulius J. Styron. (Hilary insists that she has not made any of these names up, and I suppose I must believe her. But, really—Crulius J. Styron?)

I feel vaguely envious of the Benford ancestral list, which fills seven pages. (Opal Minnie May Benford! Caledonia Styron! Cicero Amos Nelson!) But actually it's a pretty minor deal compared with that of the British royal family, which goes back to William the Conqueror and onward into the past to the first Dukes of Normandy. There is many a twist and turn in that genealogy. naturally-the present crop of royals is descended from a German branch of the family, and before them came the Stuarts, a bunch of Scots, and their cousins the Tudors who ruled before them were Welsh. etc., etc. Still, William's blood flowed in them all. And even the British line is small potatoes next to that of the reigning dynasty of Japan, which claims descent from the prehistoric sun-goddess Amaterasu. Since even the Japanese concede that Amaterasu is a mythical figure, the claim to an unbroken line of descent may be a bit tenuous, but I, with my pitiful three and a half generations of genealogical information, am certainly in no position to challenge it.

Now, though, comes an opportunity for all of us, not just the British and Japanese royals, or the Benfords and genealogically impoverished people like me, to trace our ancestries clear back to paleolithic times. Imagine it—a family tree stretching fifty thousand years or more into the past! (What if I discover that I'm a distant cousin of Queen Elizabeth? What if the Queen locates a Neanderthal branch of the Plantagenet line? What were the first names of the Cro-Magnon Benfords? Fun and surprises for us all.)

The benefactors who hope to create this fount of information for us are of impeccable lineage themselves: nobody less than the National Geographic Society and the IBM Corporation. The project will be aided by such institutions as the Laboratory of Human Population Genetics in Moscow, the Center for Excellence in Genomic Sciences in India, and the Center for Genome Information at the University of Cincinnati. Together, these groups will seek to assemble, over the next five years, a gigantic genetic database that will use thousands of DNA samples to track the routes of ancient migratory peoples out of the ancestral human home in East Africa and onward to Europe, Asia, and eventually the Alabama of the Benfords and the New York of the Silverbergs and Asimovs.

The plan is to collect one hundred thousand blood samples from indigenous peoples around the world for genetic analysis. ("Indigenous peoples" are what the National Geographic Magazine used to call "natives." "Indigenous" means "native to," but we can't call them "natives" any more, just "indigenous peoples," through the same mystifying semantic process of political correctness that makes "colored person" improper and "person of color" acceptable.) The DNA information from this database will, it is hoped, provide a picture of early human migration routes throughout the world

How do you and I and the Benfords enter into this? Well, for

# SUBSCRIBE AND SAVE 50%!

Now get 6 issues of Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine delivered conveniently to your door and SAVE 50% off the newsstand price!

You'll receive 6 entertaining issues\* full of suspenseful stories, including never-before-published works by world renowned mystery writers.

That's over \$21.00 worth of delightful mystery magazines delivered right to your home for just \$10.97!

You save over \$10.00!

Order Today and





To charge your order to MC or Visa, call TOLL-FREE 1-800-220-7443

(8am-7pm EST) Orders only, please!



Alfred Hitchcock, Suite S, 6 Prowitt St. Norwalk, CT 06855-1220

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside U.S.A.: Add \$5 per year for shipping and handling. All orders must be paid in U.S. funds. "We publish double Issues twice a year which count as four issues toward your subscription. Offer expires 3/31/07.

\$99.95 any of us can obtain a DNA kit from the National Geographictwo swabs and a pair of plastic vials. You scrape a few cells from the inner wall of your cheek and mail them in, and the researchers will locate your position on the ancestral human family tree that is now under construction out of the samples being taken from the indigenous peoples. The money paid for these kits will go to finance the indigenous-population research (and, we are assured, a portion will be set aside for a fund that will help to preserve their cultures).

Some migratory paths have already been mapped. About fifty thousand years ago, men with the Y chromosome marker known as M168 (women do not have Y chromosomes) headed north out of East Africa. Some fifty centuries later these wanderers generated the M89 mutation while living in Arabia. That genetic marker still can be traced via Central Asia into Europe, and is found in many modern

men of European descent.

The new human-genome project hopes to uncover many more such migratory-route markers, and thereby to determine such things as the original home of the Chinese people or the location of the homeland of the Indo-European language from which most languages spoken in Europe, the Americas, and much of Asia are derived. Another possibility would be tracking the genetic path of the invading armies of Alexander the Great that swept through Persia, Afghanistan, and India twenty-four hundred years ago. Certain villages of fair-skinned people in northwestern India claim to be descended from Alexander's troops, but are they? DNA evidence may answer that question.

Naturally, this being the furiously politicized twenty-first century, no sooner was the project announced than it came under attack. Certain indigenous peoples believe that they have always lived in their present homelands, a fact that might not be borne out by DNA analysis. "We already know our history," said the leaders of one Northwest American Indian tribe in 1996, when an awkwardly non-Indian ancient human skeleton turned up near their reservation and scientists called for study of it. "It is passed on to us through our elders and through our religious practices. If this individual is truly over nine thousand years old, that only substantiates the belief that he is Native American. From our oral histories, we know that our people have been part of this land since the beginning of time." Plainly they won't be interested in cooperating with a project that might provide them with historical information about themselves that dif-

fers from their own tribal lore. Certain self-styled advocates for indigenous folk also have assailed the enterprise, calling it a "vampire project" because it will extract valuable information from the blood of endangered tribes while offering nothing in return. People concerned with privacy issues are worried about having the information put to sinister commercial uses. Some anthropologists say that searching for genetic differences among populations is tantamount to racism. (Should we deny the existence of genetic differences between populations? Is it purely a matter of miraculous providence that so many tall blond people are indigenous to Scandinavia and so few to China?) And a few scientists are complaining that the samples collected will not be made available to every researcher who wants access to them, only to those who are part of the project.

Despite those arguments, I think much that is of great interest and importance can come from this work. I won't learn the names of my great-great-grandparents, but perhaps we'll find out at last whether *Homo sapiens* interbred with the Neanderthals, or whether European and Polynesian seamen reached the Americas in early prehistoric times, or where the aboriginal inhabitants of fustralia came from.

On the other hand, I—who have managed to get along pretty well in life with scarcely a clue to my family history—wonder whether the chief outcome of the project may simply be a loud scientific and political uproar. I think I'll leave the final word here to that grand sage of science fiction, Robert A. Heinlein, who had this to say in The Notebooks of Lazarus Long: "This sad little lizard told me that

he was a brontosaurus on his mother's side. I did not laugh; people who boast of ancestry often have little else to sustain them. Humoring them costs nothing and adds to happiness in a world in which happiness is always in short supply." O

#### CORRECTION:

In a column on serialized novels that appeared in Asimov's October-November 2005 issue, I erred when I said that "Asimov's has serialized just three novels in its entire history—one by William Gibson, one by Michael Swanuvick, one by Robert Silverberg." In fact is: serials have been published here—a second one by Michael Swanwick, a two-part serial by Frederik Pohl, and Harlan Ellison's I Robot, a novel in screen-play form.

#### **CHOOSE**

"the one of you will have a soul,"
the spirit said at the beginning of things,
"and the other will run free;
the one of you might find heaven—
the other will bark at the moon."

then the thing that would be wolf and the thing that would be human looked at the spirit

and asked, "to whom and how will you give these things?"

"choose," said the spirit, "choose, and tell me," and the spirit smiled while the thing that would be human and the thing that would be wolf cast lots, and laughed when the wolf won, choosing the moon.



## LETTERS

Dear Ms. Williams:

I have been a subscriber to Asimov's for about fifteen years, ever since my wife gave me a gift subscription. After all that time the appearance of a new Asimov's in the mailbox still brings me a smile of anticipation, and why not? Month after month most of the stories are good, many are very good, and some are just excellent. Unfortunately, Kristine Kathryn Rusch's "Diving into the Wreck" in the December 2005 issue is the exception. What's strange is how clearly the source material shows through: Robert Kurson's wonderful non-fiction book Shadow Divers, and Star Trek: The Next Generation's episode 164, "The Pegasus." We could make a checklist of story plot elements that are found in the sources. Following a line from the boat to the wreck? Check. The dangers of distraction, running out of air, sharp edges? Check, Watching grainy videos of what's in the wreck? Check. A father and son diving team that gets into trouble? Check. Mysterious stealth (cloaking) technology

that is dangerously unstable? Check. Maybe if I'd never read Shadow Divers I would have found the story compelling, instead of disappoint-

ing.

Andrew Klein Chicago, Illinois

The author replies. . . .

First, because I used to be a Star Trek writer, I'm sure I have seen the Pegasus episode, but I really don't remember it. (Even now, being reminded of it, I don't remember it.) Technology is always unstable, always has problems, and that's the basis for the technology in the story.

I also followed an historian's maxim (my training is in history); technology gets lost over time. People forget how to do it; it loses effectiveness; something better (or worse) comes along. In this story, the lost technology isn't just the ship. It's also in the diving. I deliberately modeled the wreck diving on modern diving, All of the techniques that Mr. Klein mentioned are real diving techniquesand real divers' worries. So, of course they'd be in a book about diving-

and in my story. My husband Dean Wesley Smith was a professional diver for years. He did everything from teach diving to search for missing (and presumed drowned) children. I relied heavily on Dean's expertise for my story. Shadow Divers was an influence, but not in the way Mr. Klein expects. I asked my husband if he wanted to read the book about people diving into old undersea wrecks. He said, "Why? Those people are crazy." And hence, the inspiration for the story.

I'm sorry the story didn't work for vou, Mr. Klein, but I do appreciate the close read.

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Dear Editor Let me now celebrate Asimov's book reviewer(s). Norman Spinrad's review essay in the October/November issue prompted my determination to place credit where it seems not to go-at least not nearly as often as the quality and usefulness of the product justifies. Am I right? Is the correspondence your office receives from readers in praise of book reviews as thin as the credit academics get for parallel efforts?

Truly, the quality of Mr. Spinrads's text and conceptual content is at par or better relative to the rest of the magazine . . . and the same has generally been the case, issue after issue, reviewer after reviewer. Even if I never get around to reading a single publication that's mentioned, I've always gone away impressed and enlightened by Asimov's book review essaws.

By way of a personal illustration, several years ago one reviewer's essay covered Cetaganda, by Lois Mc-Master Bujold. Intrigued, I picked up a copy at a local bookstore (now a decade defunct, but that's quite another lament) and was so taken by its blend of space opera, romance and whodunnit styles that I promptly added the rest of Mrs. Bujold's then-extant works to my collection.

These days I get equal satisfaction from reading and re-reading the first two books in Lois's "Chalion" setting. Had it not been for the quality of that long-ago review in Asimov's, I might never have been made aware of an author whose works I now value highly enough to buy as soon as they appear—and at hard-bound prices.

Michael R. Wilson

Dear Sheila Williams:

I have been reading Analog since 1962 and then bridged to Asimov's when that publication started. With each change of editor the tenor of the magazines changed. Sometimes I wondered whether I was reading a science fiction magazine or a fantasy magazine that was flavored with a few SF paragraphs. During the previous editorship of Asimov's my reading was intermittent and only after I had finished the Analog. Sometimes issues would go unread for months.

I had not realized that there was a

change in the "commanding officer" when I started reading the April/May issue of Asimov's many months late. However, by the third story I was once again devouring the magazine. Honestly, I felt I was back in the Campbell era.

Simply, your choice of authors is much to my liking and as I enter retirement, *Asimov's* will continue to be on the list of publications I will

afford to keep.

William Wilbur Boron, CA

Dear Ms. Williams:

While I enjoyed your usual line-up of features, fiction, and poetry in the December 2005 issue, (keep shivvying William Sanders out of his semiretirement!) as a long-time Asimov's subscriber, I would like to take a moment and add my voice, however still, small, off-key that it may be, to the chorus of Connie Willis readers who would be delighted to see her return with another Christmas story in 2006

I thought that "Just like the Ones We Used to Know" (December 2003) was one of her best stories yet! I also liked her more recent "Inside Job" (January 2005) so much that I recommended its book version for purchase at the three libraries where I have library cards. Would it help if Willis readers launched an email campaign to recruit a certain jolly gentleman from the North Pole for some heavy-duty heave-ho-ho-ho assistance in this matter?

Michael D. Toman South Pasadena, CA

We're doing our best to encourage both writers to send us new stories. I hope readers who enjoyed Connie's "Just like the Ones We Used to Know" had the chance to see it televised on CBS (as Snow Wonder) in late November.

-Sheila Williams

## A POSSIBLE PLANET: SF & ELECTRONIC MUSIC

ike many Asimov's readers, my diet of literature consists of a great number of science fiction novels, short story anthologies, and magazines. It is not the only artistic pursuit I'm interested in, but it's accurate to say that reading science fiction has had a profound influence on my own day-to-day life, my intellectual development as an adult, and the formation of my attitudes about our contemporary American culture and its place in the present and future world. The other great artistic love of my life is electronic music, a sonic genre as diverse, innovative, and without boundary as that of the best written science fiction. Though it may seem an oblique comparison, the wildly diverse sub-genres of electronic music have influenced and informed my intellectual development in as profound a manner as the classics of science fiction.

Since I first encountered electronic music in high school, it has operated as an unofficial soundtrack to the novels and stories I've read. For me, Aphex Twin's stark and experimental timbres on Selected Ambient Works, Volume II will always evoke mental associations of Michael Moorcock's A Cure for Cancer; Hans-Joachim Roedelius's warm, pastoral Wenn der Sudwind Weht album conjures images of Walter Tevis's Mockingbird: atmospheric guitarist Jeff Pearce's Daylight Slowly takes me back to the lovely world of Asimov's The Naked Sun-not to mention irrevocably

reminding me of the beautiful Gladia—and on and on.

Because of these strong associations, when I read science fiction novels and stories, I'm always amused to see writers weaving tales of extremely futuristic milieus-dystopian cities, gender-bending cultures, post-Singularity ways of existence-all featuring extremely dated or "oldfashioned" musical choices. There is nothing that seems more incongruous, to me, than reading about blues rock bands jamming in a futuristic club setting, or android simulacrums with looks based upon Jim Morrison or Elvis. While these choices on the part of the writers are certainly valid, given the musicians' influence and popularity, I have always thirsted for a more intentionally futuristic sounding music appearing in the science fiction I read. It seems to me that inexplicable alien cultures deserve music that is equally inexplicably alien!

Though there have been stories that have dealt with this theme masterfully, the musics chosen by authors for their novels and stories are largely quite traditional, and hardly ever daring, experimental, or conceptual from a modern listener's viewpoint. Even from the perspective of a knowledgeable listener in the mid-1970s, as electronic music became more prominent, these limiting sound-choices seem to be as futuristic as a plastic shower curtain, or an electrical vacuum cleaner-innovations of their time, but, when integrated into futuristic modernity, a

strange, though certainly romantic, anachronism.

This is not to say modern science fiction writers are all stuck in an eternal 1960s acid-rock or baroque musical future. As an example to the contrary, M. John Harrison's recent novel Light contains an example of future-thinking in regard to musical styles of times to come: "Music was everywhere, transformation dub bruising the ear, you could hear its confrontational basslines twenty miles out to sea." In our own world. dub music is an intriguing subgenre of Jamaican reggae noted for innovative studio-production techniques and a bass-heavy, echoed, hypnotic vibe. Though the invented genre of "transformation dub" is never satisfactorily explained in Light, it instills thought-provoking associations I very much appreciated as I wondered, days after reading the novel, what the music might sound like, how it came about, and what collision of past musical influences might have been responsible for its creation.

Futuristic electronic sound and science fiction have often been associated with each other throughout their popular histories. Louis and Bebe Barron's otherworldly sound-track of "electronic tonalities" for the film Forbidden Planet comes immediately to mind as music constructed specifically to shade an otherworldly sci-fi odvssev.

Artists of electronic music have benefited greatly from the pollination of SFnal ideas. These intrepid purveyors of decidedly strange sounds are heavily influenced by both science fiction literature and cinema. Perhaps it is only a matter of time before the influence of these musicians is in turn felt by tomorrow's SF writers and filmmakers.

The roll call of talented, influential artists and musicians in the electronic genre is long, diverse, and already the topic of several books and countless articles in print and online publications. I could easily wax poetic on dozens of fascinating artists who are worthy of broad attention by music lovers everywhere. For the purpose of this article—and for the continued sanity of those who are curious about the electronic genre, but are unsure where to start listening-I will describe a choice few artists who are directly involved in, influenced by, or have had oblique dalliances with SF literature. Perhaps by exploring some of the following fine musicians and their recordings, your interest may be piqued enough to begin your own odyssey through the wild, strange, and beautiful world of electronically created sound.

One of the most fascinating figures in electronic music is French guitarist, synthesist, Sorbonne philosophy professor, and composer Richard Pinhas. His influence upon electronic music since the 1970s, an influence somewhat obscure until recently, has been far-reaching. Through his band Heldon (named after Norman Spinrad's utopian city in The Iron Dream) he is credited, along with German innovators Tangerine Dream, as one of the first musicians to combine electronics and rock 'n' roll into a startlingly progressive and original hybrid.

His guitar style—reminiscent of King Crimson guitarist Robert Fripp's musical experiments with producer Brian Eno (Eno will be discussed later)—is provocative and emotional. Sometimes violent and aggressive, other times angelic and exuberant, Pinhas's searing guitar marked the beginning of the electronic-punk sound.

Heldon's 1975 album Allez Teia melds lovely tape-loop-derived guitar passages with the most modern analog synthesizers of the time. It's also an overtly political album, with cover art depicting the Paris student riots of 1968. Though peaceful in mood. Allez Teia was quite revolutionary for presenting an album of idvllic soundscapes during a tumultuous and angry time in music. While punk expressed its rage with loud music and shambolic live concerts. Pinhas's rage was focused toward painfully beautiful and melancholy music.

Pinhas, a political and philosophical radical, always managed to infuse his many albums, both solo and with Heldon, with the visionary literature and philosophy that influenced him: Gilles Deleuze, Philip K. Dick, Frank Herbert, and Norman Spinrad are frequently touched upon in song titles, album dedications, and, in some cases, guest appearances. Pinhas featured spokenword recordings of Deleuze on some of his albums with Heldon and his later solo material. Pinhas's albums Chronolyse and DWW are based on the SF works of Frank Herbert and Philip K. Dick, respectively (though DWW's cover depicts a Fremen of Arrakis as interpreted by Heavy Metal magazine illustrator Philippe Druillet). Track titles like "Paul Atredies," "Sur le Theme de Bene Gesserit," "Ubik," and "The Joe Chip Song" demonstrate Pinhas's tireless creation of unofficial soundtracks for the great works of science fiction he loves, Norman Spinrad himself sings on Pinhas's East / West album and the first album by Schitzotrope (a project between French science fiction writer Maurice Dantec and Pinhas featuring "French readings of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy with metatronic music and vocal processors," and, yes, it is as cool and weird as it sounds).

Pinhas's most recent solo work. 2004's Tranzition (reviewed in Asimov's by Paul Di Filippo in a recent issue), even features an old tape fragment of Philip K. Dick speaking about his role as a writer. Tranzition is a fine work of interstellar musical ambiance, with masterful guitar playing and software-based musicianship, proving Pinhas is still as relevant in 2004 as he was in 1974. The revolutionary, experimental spirit infused in classic New Wave science fiction is embodied in Pinhas's music sonically, with the same broad level of influence to successors in his genre. His work is an incendiary music of change, pointing the way to possible futures through advanced technology and thought systems

Richard Pinhas is not the only figure in early electronic music to be influenced by science fictional ideas. Synthesizer legend Klaus Schulze got his start drumming in both Tangerine Dream and the German freerock band Ash Ra Tempel, a group steeped in psychedelic sci-fi imagery courtesy of sixties drug culture and the far-out "teachings" of LSD guru Timothy Leary (who sang what can only be called acid-blues on their 1973 album Seven-Up), Schulze soon distanced himself from that scene, establishing himself as an innovator of cosmic drones coaxed out of traditional organs and as a tireless experimenter with the newest synthesizer technologies of the day on landmark albums such as Irrlicht, TimeWind, Cyborg (a monochromatic double album featuring the "Cosmic Orchestra"), and his "electronic winter landscape" Mirage. Schulze's work is epic in scope, aurally depicting deep space, barren terrain, and ethereal alien beings through haunting electronic drone-scapes. Though these classic albums now sound dated, especially in light of today's synth capabilities, the mood created is one of classic and New Wave science fiction. These albums can easily be heard as soundtracks to the musings of future-thinking writers, and to futures that will never come to pass. If anything, the sad tone of these classic records embodies the knowledge we all possess while we read our science fiction favorites: the fabulous worlds we love can only be experienced vicariously through reading and listening . . . never in the flesh.

Schulze's 1979 album Dune presents two long electronic pieces inspired by Herbert's classic. Frank Herbert had previously been honored with a ten-minute piece on Schulze's 1978 X album, which signaled a more bombastic and orchestrated side of synthesizer composition, and was also Schulze's first foray into electronic classical music. Since that time, Schulze has recorded many more albums, some with science fictional themes, but never with the same otherworldly, futuristic flair as his early work. Interestingly, his recent collaborations with German synth-artist Pete Namlook, The Dark Side of the Moog seriesreferring to both Pink Floyd's classic album and the Moog synthesizer (popularized by electronic-music pioneer Wendy Carlos's Moog renditions of Bach on 1968's best-selling Switched-On Bach)-have returned Schulze to his cosmic roots in a modern and relevant style. Schulze may no longer limn the edges of futuristic music, but his classic material is pure, unforgettable SF-future nostalgia. It's a future we will never ourselves see, expressed by Schulze through his cosmic synthesizers and visionary musicianship.

Klaus Schulze is commonly regarded as one of the founding fathers of today's electronic music. composing with synthesizer technology in a way previously undreamed of. His peer in influence, Brian Eno, is credited with "inventing" an entire sub-genre of largely electronic music, unhelpfully called "ambient." Eno is more popularly known for his groundbreaking work as a studio producer (as examples, Eno produced seminal rock records such as U2's The Joshua Tree and Talking Heads' Remain in Light) and as a rigorous and playfully conceptual thinker. Remember the pretty threesecond sound-snippet you heard whenever you booted up your Windows 95 computer? Brian Eno created that, too.

Eno's career is terrifyingly diverse, his projects numerous and well documented by fans who border on manically obsessive, collecting every recording, sound-byte, and written word available from him. By focusing on a small section of his enormous oeuvre, I am of necessity ignoring a large amount of his material in a variety of artistic disciplines: visual art, video installations, essays; the list is daunting. The EnoWeb internet site is an indispensable source of information regarding Eno and all of his projects-I'd be remiss if I didn't mention it here: http://www.enoweb.co.uk

Eno's popular history began as keyboardist in the sophisticated glam-rock band Roxy Music. He quickly moved on to unusual rock projects under his own name; albums with Hawkwind (a band with plenty of science fictional relations, including one-time member Michael Moorocck) and Hawkwind vocalist Robert Calvert; collaborations with David Bowie on some of Bowie's most critically acclaimed albums; and the founding of Eno's own label, Obscure Records, where he released a number of seminal LPs by avant garde luminaries John Cage, Gavin Bryars, Michael Nyman, and others.

In the trailblazing spirit of these Obscure recordings, Eno's Ambient series of the late seventies and early eighties-consisting of four albums, two by Eno, one a collaboration with minimalist pianist Harold Budd, the fourth a shimmering album by dulcimer artist Laraaii-were inspired by a "new" method of listening to music. Eno, confined to bed in 1975 after being struck by a car, and unable to rise from his recumbent position, had only a record of innocuous harp music playing at low volume in his room. This music melded gently with the noises of outside life and activity occurring around Eno as he rested, inspiring in him the idea of a new kind of music to be listened to actively or passively, as a constant, unobtrusive atmosphere. In the liner notes of his first released collection of proto-ambient sound, 1975's Discreet Music, Eno wrote, "this presented what was for me a new way of hearing music-as part of the ambience of the environment just as the colour of the light and sound of the rain were parts of the ambience." Ambient, as Eno saw it, should "be as ignorable as it is listenable," a new type of mood music that colored the listener's space, acted as a sort of "thinking music" dipping in and out of audibility, occasionally imbuing mundane, everyday activities with an emotional feeling or texture that was not otherwise present or perceived without the music.

Discreet Music and its successors in the official Ambient series are all similarly contemplative in mood. even if the methods employed in their individual creations vary greatly. Ethereal textures, long pauses between notes, fuzzy washes of sound, unusual sonic effects, and vaporous vocals all have their places on the albums. The fourth volume in the series, Ambient 4: On Land, is a collection of auditory renderings of geographical locations with titles like "Lizard Point" and "Dunwich Beach. Autumn, 1960." The cover artwork for the series, topographical map images, also reflects this locational aesthetic. Eno's intent, successfully rendered on these albums, and many others to follow, was "... making music to swim in, to float in, to get lost inside"-a recorded topography of dream music.

Listeners unused to the largely innocuous atmospheres of the Ambient series might find them to be a

### MOVING?

Please send both your old and new address (and include both zip codes) to our subscription department.

Write to us at: Asimov's Science Fiction, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-

little too ignorable, as they eschew traditional melodies in favor of form-less, and often seemingly arbitrary, scatterings of sound. It is easy, however, to imagine a future people-like Moorcock's Dancers at the End of Time or the bored, immortal future-humans of Jim Grimsley's story in the February 2005 Asimov's, "The 120 Hours of Sodom"—enjoying atmospheric music as they might a perfume or colorful light display.

Eno's ambient music has been applied to some science fictional works. A slipcased set from 1979 containing Robert Sheckley's novella "In a Land of Clear Colours," packaged alongside an LP featuring the story read aloud with Eno's synthesizer-based ambient music as backing atmosphere, is regarded as a valued collectible by Eno enthusiasts. These ambient textures are culled largely from Ambient 4: On Land. Another obscurity, this one more recent, is Man in the Moon: The Loving Tongue, a CD collection of spoken word pieces by a wide variety of artists. Here, rock band R.E.M.'s vocalist Michael Stipe reads from Samuel Delany's novel Dhalgren with background music by Eno.

A most telling quote about Eno's strange place in the musical land-scape is William Gibson's own take (in a 1996 Arena article) on the track (King's Lead Hat' from Eno's off-kilter rock album Before and After Science: "Not that I don't admire and enjoy the rest of his work, but this one song is so stark in its singularity as to seem a temporal apport from some tooned-up future of inverted world-music funk. I've used it for years as a sort of benchmark of peculiarity."

Since Eno's original conceptualization of ambient music, the ambient genre itself has ballooned outward to include a wide variety of styles of music, most of which do not strictly adhere to his original thinking of the ambient concept. Today's modern electronic artists have a rich musical history to integrate into their own work, taking what they need from just about anything recorded and integrating the sonic spare parts and cultural detritus into their own styles.

A perfect example of this stylistic mixing is techno. Commonly agreed by music historians to have been created by several musicians and DJs from Detroit, Michigan, techno can be envisioned as a hybrid of German synth-pop group Kraftwerk's quirky tunes, the funk music of George Clinton and Parliament, and the hazy tonal washes of ambient. Techno tracks, whether by the original Detroit innovators or the legions of artists they influenced, were often thematically tied to science fiction and space travel. Juan Atkins-regarded with fellow Detroit artists Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson as a godfather of techno-recording as Model 500 and Infiniti, explored themes of interstellar travel on his albums Deep Space and Skynet. Later artists like Carl Craig, with his album Landcruising, and UK artists B12, with their Electro-soma and Time Tourist albums, all dealt with the shiny (though sometimes rather grim and dystopian) new world of the future, conspiring to make listeners dance their asses off all the while. More obscure artists Drexciva even adopted science fiction concepts for the explanation behind their own mysterious techno project-LPs by the "band" (their member(s) a guarded secret) spoke of the Drexciyans: a race of African people who managed to survive underwater, their ancestors having been jettisoned from slave ships in the Atlantic Ocean.

Techno itself sounds and feels like music of the future—a musical future originally envisioned by young black men influenced by funk and dance music, science fiction, Alvin Toffler, and the urban megalopolis around them. In the minds and hearts of many listeners, rock is dead, replaced by the syncopated machine beats of publicly faceless artists and their mechanically rendered musical progeny.

Techno forefathers Kraftwerk were themselves no strangers to science fictional concepts. Almost all of their albums dealt conceptually with future technologies. Their image, on album covers and publicity shots, was that of a perfect man-machine hybrid. Album art often consisted of mannequins made in their own images-these real life mannequin doppelgängers (and later mechanized robots) frequently appeared in the places their human bodies should have been during concerts. Their music was minimal and percussive, with a futuristic, sheen that influenced artists in hip hop, techno, and the synth-pop of the eighties. One need only listen to The Man Machine or Computer World to find a very real grounding in futurism and science fiction, lyrically and musically.

Kraftwerk's influential sound can be detected in the music of their antecedents like eighties synth-popper Gary Numan (whose music was equally influenced by David Bowie' and Philip K. Dick in songs like "Are Friends Electric?"), or The Normal (whose only single was 1978's "Warm Leatherette"—the lyrics a reference to J.G. Ballard's Crash). Kraftwerk's music is heavily sampled in early rap hit "Planet Rock" by Afrika Bambaataa, not to mention more recent, discreetly sampled, appearances in tracks by Missy Elliot and others. Like all paradigm-shifting artists, Kraftwerk's impact will be felt, like outspreading ripples in a pond, for many years to come.

I could continue for many more pages with recommendations of music I'd love more people to know about and try for themselves. In spite of this desire, I'll mention just one more electronic music project of note-a project with a direct, fascinating connection to science fiction. The 1996 compilation CD titled Narratives: Music for Fiction features three of electronic and experimental music's most talented artists interpreting fictional works musically, just as Eno attempted to create soundtracks for films that never existed on some of his own albums. Narratives is on Manifold Records, a label based in Memphis, Tennessee, that specializes in darker types of ambient music, noise music (ves. it's a legitimate musical form with a ravenous fanbase), and other recordings that can only be classified as unclassifiable.

mciassinable.
First on Narratives is "Seribo Aso" by Australian artist Paul Schütze, his take on Lucius Shepard's "Kalimantan"—a strangely claustrophobic, rhythmic journey that has a Balinese Gamelan feel. (Incidentally, one of Schütze's best albums is New Maps of Hell, the title of which is culled from Kingsley Amis's critical exploration of science fiction.) Next, though not science fiction related, is an atmospheric and creepy portrayal of Hermann Hesse's Siddhartha by Texan experimental artists Voice of Eye. This track is not for the faint

of heart-listening in a darkened room isn't recommended, at least not by a sissy like me. The final track is California ambient-electronic artist Robert Rich's transcendent musical tribute to Starmaker by Olaf Stapledon. It's a marvelously long piece, clocking in at over twentyone minutes. The "suite" is split into four parts, "Interstellar Travel," "Worlds Innumerable," "The Beginning of the End," and "The Myth of Creation"-titles that describe this vast-sounding composition better than I can. Obviously, many of today's electronic musicians are voracious readers tuned in to science fiction's unique perspectives, and are actively interested in integrating these attributes into their own work.

Electronic music as a stylistic genre is compelling and popular enough to inspire many critics to write volumes describing its intricate lattice of influences, artists, and styles. It can also be a daunting genre to explore for the neophyte. For the beginner, I suggest browsing the All Music Guide to Electronica. which, while neither perfect nor exhaustive, offers plenty of information and starting points from which the curious can begin exploring. For those interested in more in-depth looks at certain artists or styles, I recommended Ben Kettlewell's Electronic Music Pioneers; Analog Days: the Invention and Impact of the Moog Synthesiser by Frank Trocco: David Toop's Ocean of Sound; Techno Rebels: The Renegades of Electronic Funk by Dan Sicko; and Brian Eno: His Music and the Vertical Color of Sound by Eric Tamm. A caveat about the last-it's delightfully obtuse, technical, and not for those easily frustrated by Ph.D. theses. You might be better served by Eno's own published diary, A Year with Swollen Appendices, as an introduction to this fascinating thinker-musician.

Like it or not, electronic music and its many forms and styles are here to stay. One need only listen to today's advertisements on television to hear both underground electronic music (I've heard tracks by experimental electronic groups Oval and Autechre in both car and perfume commercials) and homogenized versions of techno and electronic dance music. If it is ubiquitous today, appearing in a variety of mass media, it seems likely to permeate the future even more deeply, where it will surely become an unalterable part of our cultural landscape. The most exciting part. for this listener and reader, is in wondering exactly what I'll be listening to in fifty years-transformation dub? healing noise? translated whalesong? I, for one, plan to keep my eyes on the horizon and my ears always open. O

Asimov's Associate Editor Brian Bieniowski lives in New Jersey with his wife, Bianca Miele. Those curious to explore Brian's electronic music favorites can do so via his "Quiet Sounds" podcast available free at: http://www.asphalteden.com.

# **INCLINATION**

## William Shunn

Born in L.A. and raised in Utah, William Shunn has lived for the past ten years in New York City, where he and his wife Laura are proud owners of a soft-coated wheaten terrier named Ella. Since his first publication in 1993, his stories have appeared in Salon, F&SF, Science Fiction Age, Realms of Fantasy, Electric Velocipede, Storyteller, and elsewhere. He has served the past three years as a national juror for the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. Bill also works as a software developer, and on September 11, 2001, he created what may have been the first online "survivor registry," where people in affected cities could let friends and loved ones know they were okay. His powerful new novella, "Inclination," about a young man's unsettling journey toward self discovery, is part of a loosely linked series of stories set in and around Netherview Station. A previous story in this milieu, "Dance of the Yellow-Breasted Luddites," was nominated for the Nebula Award in 2002.

The Manual tells us that in the beginning the Builder decreed six fundamental Machines. These are his six aspects, and all we do we must do with the Six. We need no other machines.

I believe this with all my heart. I do. And yet sometimes I seem to intuit the existence of a seventh Machine, hovering like a blasphemous ghost just beyond apprehension.

There is something wrong with me, and I don't know what it is.

Late for my curfew and trembling, I grasp the doorknob that is not a doorknob.

This is the Machinist Quarter—only a tiny sliver of Netherview Station's Ring B, though I'm one of the few boys I know who has ever been outside it. Fo-grav stays off in the Quarter; our only simulation of gravity is the 0.25 g of natural centripetal acceleration born of the station's rota-

tion and our two-kilometer distance from the hub. We joke that this is why it's called the Quarter. It sure isn't called that after the ratio of its volume to the station's.

The cabin I share with my father Thomas lies in the Inclined Plane branch, third transverse, twelfth hatch on the left. Standing at the hatch, I straighten my billed cap and smooth my coverall—each emblazoned with a right triangle stitched in dove-gray thread, representing our ward—and gently turn the knob. Recessed lights at deck level cast my diffuse shadow up the bulkheads to either side of me. The knob operates as if it were mounted on a genuine mechanical axle, though of course it isn't. A dumb mechanical doorknob wouldn't unlock to my touch alone, or Thomas's. I hate the doorknob. I hate the deceitfulness of it, the way its homogeneous smart matter mimics the virtuous and differentiated and pure. I hate what it conceals. I hate it for not keeping me out.

With a silent prayer to the Builder, I push the hatch open. It swings inward on soundless, lying hinges. I tread lightly inside, in case Thomas is sleeping, the nonslippers on my feet helping me keep my steps short and low. But as I round the door I see Thomas sitting up on his bunk in his short gray underall, watching me enter. The door closes itself behind me, which no door should do unbidden. The cabin is narrow and unadorned but for a diagram of the Six Fundamental Machines affixed to the rear bulkhead, and a small wooden chest bolted to the deck beneath it. The air reeks of a coppery sourness that matches Thomas's narrowed glare. The cabin is so tiny I could reach out and stroke his curly, graying hair if I wanted, but that's an urge that no longer seizes me often. Anyway, the days when I could reliably charm him out of his anger are long past.

"You're late, son," he says. He's squinting at me now, eyes unfocused, the way he does sometimes. He doesn't even glance at the chronometer on his wrist—a true mechanism, with tiny metal gears and not smart matter in-

side, a symbol of his status as a merchant trader. "It's past your curfew."
"I'm sorry," I say, turning my back and reaching for the crank that will

fold my bunk down from the bulkhead opposite his.

His voice grates out in sharp, tight bursts like the strokes of a rasp on iron: "If you were sorry, you'd have been on time."

My shoulder blades prickle. I say nothing, cranking down the bunk. "Jude, you're fifteen years old," Thomas says. "Why do you think you

still have so many rules? Why?"

I try to shrug, but the effort feels jerky, like the gesture of a marionette. "I was waiting my turn at devotions," I say, clinging to the false crank. "You know—with Nic and the rest. But the Foremen wouldn't—they stayed past their time, and we, well ..."

Thomas has risen, his voice at the back of my neck, shivering my spine. "I was out looking for you. I spoke to Nicodemus an hour ago. In Plane,

not at gymnasium."

My blood runs chill. That's two lies I've told, and he's caught me in one already. Nicodemus is my best friend, or used to be, but lately I've been avoiding him. We were up late working on our motors in the schola a couple of weeks ago. He was helping me get the timing right on mine and his fingers brushed the back of my hand. It was just an accident. We've been

Inclination 2

friends all our lives, but it was like seeing him for the first time. I wanted to touch his face, though I didn't let myself. The scary thing was, it didn't feel wrong, and that scares me all the more.

Of course I can't explain this to Thomas. Nor can I explain why more and more I can't force myself to evening devotions on time. The cleansing room where we change and shower is like a chamber of horrors. None of the boys seem bothered by disrobing in front of each other, but it bothers me acutely. Letting them see my body makes me want to tear my skin off.

My bunk is halfway lowered. I want to turn and defend myself against Thomas's implicit accusation but a bolus of confusion clogs my throat. Words swarm like dust in my brain, eluding my grasp. Why do I have to explain any of this to him? Why doesn't he just know? And why is it his business?

"Great Builder, Jude," Thomas says at my back, "if you have to lie to me, how can I trust you at a job?"

My shoulders stiffen, my head half turns.

"That's right, I've lined up a job for you, Do you understand, son? At the hub."

A sick despair flares in my gut. Outside the Quarter? Could things get any worse?

"I need you up early, and fresh, but you're out doing Builder knows what when you should be in bed. Did I raise you to be this way, Jude? Did I?"

Tiny flecks of spittle flense the back of my neck. I was at my devotions. I really was, I want to say, but the words won't come.

"Answer me when I speak!" Thomas says, seizing my arm and spinning

me around. My cap with its Inclined Plane insignia flies off my head. The skinny legs tensed for violence, the slow ripple of his round, protruding belly, the sharpening rage on his gray blade of a face-I'm bigger

and taller, but I might as well be five again for all that I can stand up to what's coming. He shakes me. "You will honor your father, that your days may be long

upon the earth!"

Saline globules tremble at the corners of my eyes, watery jewels sparkling across my sight. The words burst out before I know I'm speaking: "There's no earth here, only metal."

My father's face flushes livid. He spins, hurling me across the cabinnot difficult, since my weight is just twenty kilos. I sprawl across my fa-

ther's bunk, all gawky limbs and terror.

I roll over and there he is looming above me, fists raised and shaking. It's been months since last he struck me, an improbable lucky streak which now seems about to end. But he lowers his arms and leans over me.

"The Wrecker's in you, boy," he says, shaking a finger. "You pray hard and shake loose his grip. Pray to be made square and true. Tomorrow

more than ever, you need the Builder to be with you."

And now he's pulling on his coverall and leaving the cabin to stalk off his anger, the hatch snicking shut behind him like a quiet tap to a finishing nail. Alone, I flow off the bunk to the floor, to my knees, to retrieve my cap and pray.

I'm out of true and I need fixing. Through shuddering tears I pray for

the Builder to make me a better son, a stronger laborer, a whole person. I pray for his protection, both physical and spiritual. I pray for reassurance that Thomas doesn't really mean to send me alone among the Sculpted in the morning

When I finally crawl into my bunk and wrap the blanket around myself, though, it's not the Builder with his Machines I picture watching over me in the dark It's my departed mother Kaiya angel wings spread

above me in a canopy of white.

The Builder has ignored my prayer, at least the part about the Sculpted. We rise and dress early, Thomas and I, and exit our cabin. In one hand Thomas carries a gray cloth sack big enough to hold a loaf of bread.

Only the most devoted practitioners are awake at this hour, en route to gymnasium. Rather than follow them, Thomas leads me to the end of the next branch over, to where Saul, foreman of Inclined Plane, lives. The only mark that sets this hatch apart from every other in the row is the small carpenter's source etched at its very center.

Foreman Saul appears in the hatchway, bleary-eyed, at Thomas's knock. "Selah, Jude," he says in greeting, favoring me with a look both compassionate and foreboding. "Brother Thomas. let me speak to vou

alone a moment. We'll only be a bit. Jude."

atone a moment. We I only be a bit, outde.

Thomas follows Saul inside without a glance at me. I stand in the corridor and mentally rehearse the Builder's Code. I'm still in Lever, less than halfway through the Hexalogue, when the hatch opens again. Saul osstures me in

The cabin is a little smaller than the one Thomas and I share, and consequently more crowded than ours ever gets. Thomas sits at one end of the only bunk, cloth sack in his lap. He pats the space beside him, and I sit. Saul picks up a thermos from the foldout stovetop that juts from the rear bulkhead and sips carefully at the spout. The air smells faintly of powdered coffee and machine oil.

"Jude," Saul says, "your father let me know late last night that he's secured you a position on a stevedore crew at the docks. Unfortunately, as you're required there promptly this morning and you can now be fined for tardiness, there's no time to go through the usual series of preparatory

lessons before you leave the safety of the Quarter."

lessons before you leave the safety of the Quarter.

I don't miss the baleful sideways glance Saul gives Thomas, but
Thomas doesn't seem to react to it. He just sits there with the same twist
of bored impatience on his lips.

"Oh, I've been out a couple of times before," I say, if only to cut the palpable tension, which is settling into my neck. "I mean, when I was younger."

"Yes." Saul sighs, blinking his pouchy eyes a few times. He is older than my father, taller and softer, but no sadder. I've been tempted many times to bring my cares and questions to him, but something has always held me back. "You're a bright young man, Jude, and I know you've walked among the Sculpted before, so at least the sights won't be new to you. But accompanying your father once or twice on his rounds is hardly the same as working alongside them, alone, for a full shift every day. If there's no time for the proper instruction first, at the very least a blessing is in order."

Inclination 2

"Okay," I say, a little of the weight lifting from my shoulders. Even if the Builder isn't listening to me, surely he'll listen to the foreman, as pious a man as I know. But at the same time I'm beginning to feel in my gut just how much spiritual danger I'll be courting. Why is Thomas doing this to me?

"If you'll sit here?" Saul says. He's setting up a metal folding chair in the middle of the cabin, which means it nearly bumps Thomas's knees. I scoot over into the chair, doffing my cap and clutching it in my lap, as Saul removes a ceremonial oilcan from a niche in the bulkhead. Thomas joins Saul behind me. The oilcan ka-chunks, the tip of its spout tickling the hair at the crown of my head as it deposits a tiny bead of machine oil. Saul gently taps the droplet down onto my scalp, and he and Thomas lay their hands upon my head.

Other kids get to have their mothers in the cabin with them during blessings like this. I close my eyes and try to imagine Kaiya here, watching from the corner near the hatch. And she could be, right? Surely that's

not a vain hope.

"Great Builder," Saul says, "in the name of the Wheel, the Wedge, the Lever, the Plane, the Pulley, and the Screw, we bring before you your true and faithful servant Jude, who ventures forth this day to labor amongst the Sculpted for his daily bread. Be with him, Builder, that he might have health in his navel, marrow in his bones, and strength in his sinews—strength that he might work and not be weary, but moreso that the Wrecker with his subtle wiles may find no purchase in his heart, mind, or flesh. We know the Wrecker's cunning is great, Builder, and that he can make what's wrong seem right. But your power and love are infinite, and so we commend this young man to your oversight with all faith in your goodness and wisdom. May we ever draw nearer to thee, Great Builder, as the Inclined Plane rises ever to heaven. Amen."

"Amen," I say. The hands, which have grown progressively heavier during the blessing, lift from my head. I stand, rolling my head to soothe my

neck.

Saul folds the chair and sets it aside—a deft, practiced move in the cramped space—then reaches out to clasp my forearm in the Scaffold Grip. His hand is warm and dry. "What's today, Thursday? Let's meet Sundays after temple, Jude, to make some headway on those lessons. Better late than never."

"When his schedule allows," Thomas says, conspicuously checking his chronometer. "They call this Oneday outside. Weeks aren't reckoned the

same."

"Of course. Then any day you can, Jude." Saul squeezes and releases
wy forearm. "And remember that the Builder blesses you not just for obe-

dience to his commandments, but for obedience to your parents as well."
"Jude," Thomas says. He picks the sack up from the bunk and inclines

his head toward the hatch.

"Selah, Foreman," I say and follow my father out into the corridor. I look back to see, in the moment before the hatch closes behind us, Foreman Saul standing like a forlorn beast in the center of a cage.

Or is that perception just a way to make myself feel better about the

sentence to which I've been condemned?

Thomas leads me at a brisk pace out to the main corridor, skipping lightly along the deck. "Don't let him get to you, Jude," he says over his shoulder. "Saul, Bartholomew, none of the Foremen understand our economic realities."

I'm not sure whether he means our family's or the whole Quarter's. I don't ask for clarification, not just because I don't like encouraging him to disparage the Foremen but because we've turned into the main corridor and a few more people, from all different wards, are out and about now. The soft gray of their coveralls and visored caps against the brighter gray of the bulkheads make the Quarter look almost like a scene from an ancient monochrome photograph.

We pass the gymnasium entrance, then the intersections with Wedge Branch and Wheel and Axle. We're alone now, and the Primum Mobile Gate looms alead, nainted with various strident warnings and danger symbols.

"You'll have to find your own way back this evening, so pay close attention," Thomas says, pulling the lever that opens the Gate. The massive hatch grinds aside, admitting a bedlam of voices and light and sound. "Now be ready for the weight. And whatever you do, don't gawk."

My heart races. I follow Thomas through the Gate and an extra forty kilos drops onto my bones. Thanks to my faithful attention to devotions I don't fall, but I stagger and I'm sweating in the moist air before we've gone far. The public corridors are as crowded and noisy now as they are around the clock, alive with the babel of a thousand languages, and the bulkheads are lost in the riot of greenery that thrives on every available surface. I feel conspicuous in my Machinist garb. People—monsters—fall silent and stare as we pass, and with all their unsettling modifications it's hard not to stare back. I can't imagine navigating this profane world without Thomas.

We ride a slidewalk spinward, then crowd into a hubward elevator that at least contains no obvious plant life. But for every normal person, I see one with skin the wrong color or texture, limbs numbering too many or too few, a body with mysterious prosthetics or protuberances, or a head misshapen and gross. A pebbled gray creature that might once have been human brushes against me in the elevator. Dizzy, I press closer to Thomas, the sweat trickling into my eyes. I'm not sure whether his hand on my shoulder is meant to reassure me or restrain me.

At hub level, the bulkheads are again clean and metallic, as they should be. Thomas leads me through a short but bewildering maze of hatches and gangways. With fewer people around now, I breathe more easily. Thomas knocks at an open hatch. I peek inside. It's an office about a meter and a half in radius, and every surface, 720 spherical degrees around, is jammed with monitors, control panels, and handholds. The thickset woman seated at the center has a second pair of arms where her legs should be.

"I don't give a spout for your schedule," she tells someone unseen. "My stevies can do the job fast, but not that fast. All right, fine. You do that."

She looks at Thomas, and I see she has silver semispheres implanted over her eyes. Three quick swings from handhold to handhold bring her to the door. Fo-grav is still about 0.75. She's strong.

Inclination 29

"This the kid?" she asks.

"That's him," Thomas says.

She turns those reflective bug-eyes on me, twitching her head up and down, and it's like I'm being X-rayed. What she sees, I can't imagine. "Any mods? No, of course not. You goddamn Wheelies, what am I talking about? All right, he doesn't look too bad. Let's get him suited up and see how he does. What's your name, kid?"

My mouth is so dry my tongue crackles. "Jude."

"Well, now you're Stevie. For stevedore."

She barks a laugh like a chugging motor, clinging to holds around the hatch with three hands. Thomas laughs too. His eyes crinkle and his lips peel back, and it's like seeing ten years drop away from him. He never laughs around me.

In that moment I feel inexpressibly sad. And I hate him.

The woman swings out through the hatch and drops to the deck between Thomas and me. "Follow me," she says, loping down the gangway on all fours.

Thomas shoves the cloth sack into my hands. "Your lunch," he says.

I clutch the sack like a lifeline. It's three times as heavy as it should be, and its heft brings a desperate lump to my throat. On a usual morning, it's I who makes lunch for Thomas, but I didn't even think about it today. I'm realizing that the usual mornings are behind me.

"Now you work hard and do what Renny tells you," Thomas says. "I

can't stress enough how important this money is."

"Okay." I turn to trudge after the woman.

"And remember who you are," Thomas stage-whispers fiercely. "Your body belongs to the Builder, not to them."

"Selah," I say.

Thomas sighs. "Selah, son. Now go."

Renny, fidgeting impatiently, has stopped at a juncture up ahead. I follow, the grief of abandonment thick in my throat.

The Six are more than just machines. High Foreman Titus—our founder, who 120 years ago spoke with the Builder face to face—teaches us that they represent the Builder's various aspects, and thus the ways in which we must approach him. The Six also name our wards, the clans or tribes of our faith. Though my father and I belong to Inclined Plane Ward, we owe each equal adoration, and it's the Wedge that concerns me now.

The Manual teaches that the purpose of the Wedge is to both divide asunder and hold in place. From this we learn to divide ourselves from the evils of the world, as the maul divides the log, keeping always to the side of the Builder. Yet we also learn to bridge the gap between, as the keystone—a truncated wedge—holds the arch in place. The lesson for us is to serve the world, and serve as examples, without becoming corrupted by it.

As a people, we excel at dividing ourselves from the world. We don't do so well at bridging—except perhaps for my father. But between him and me there's surely a great Wedge, and it's never clear to me which of us is on which side of it.

Thomas didn't explain to me exactly what a stevedore is. Turns out it's someone who loads and unloads cargo. Starships from hundreds of light-years around dock at Netherview Station's hub, then, depending on size and mass, slide into one of three concentric levels of berths. Many of the ships are loaded automatically by robot or waldo; the ones that can't afford the special treatment (or can afford to waive it) get us.

Renny explains this to me, more colorfully, as I follow her to the locker room. She leaves me alone there to change into my docksuit, a close-fitting layer of red polymer that covers me from the neck down. I try not to think about how much smart matter I must be wearing. I leave my coverall and cap behind, like a shed snakeskin, in my thumbprint-activated locker. The heaviness I feel has nothing to do with gravity, though physically I'm breathing hard already from the exertion since leaving the Quarter. Carrying my lunch sack, I rejoin my new boss outside the locker room.

Before leading me to the berth where the crew awaits us, Renny rears up on her hind arms and affixes a round green badge to my chest. "Regs," she says. "Since you've got no built-in monitors, this'll let us keep tabs on you."

The crew is twelve, male and female both, and I make thirteen. They're lounging in a small break room off Berth C-46. Renny clambers to the top of a table and waves for quiet. "This is our new trainee," she says. "His name is Jude Plane. Corgie, he's your man this shift."

A groan from a preternaturally thin fellow sprawled out on a couch prompts laughter from the others and a sinking feeling inside me. I'm sweating, much to my embarrassment.

"Okay, you shits, okay. The Needlethreader's in dock now. Let's go."

The crew don helmets and begin to spill out a hatch opposite the one Remy brought me through. They disperse in all directions—left, right, up, down—grabbing implements from a rack outside as they go. They're all human in shape, mostly normal as far as I can see. They don't look much older than I am, but you never can tell with the Sculpted. One has bright blue skin above the collar of his suit, an eye-straining contrast with the red polymer. He winks at me as he drops out the hatch. My stomach clenches.

Renny hops down from the table and grabs Corgie by the leg before he can say a word to me. "Pay close attention to the kid," Renny says. "He's barefoot. He'll need a fishbowl on too of everything else."

"You're joking," Corgie says. "I don't think I've ever seen a fishbowl."

"There's one in the rack today along with everything else."

My trainer heaves an aggrieved sigh. "All right, Juke," he says to me. "Follow me and stick close."

"Jude," I say.
"Right, Juke."

Renny reaches for my lunch sack, which I still clutch uncertainly. She stashes it for me as I trail out the hatch after Corgie.

And suddenly I'm not just lighter. I'm weightless, and drifting.

Fo-grav isn't turned off in the berth; it's on but dialed down to null, damping even the small inertial effects of rotational velocity and cen-

Inclination 3

trifugal force. Corgie gives me a brief lesson in how to maneuver in null g with a dockwand, a thin, meter-long rod of smart matter that ejects a stream of inert particles from one end or the other on command. Basically you point it, squeeze, and drift off in the opposite direction. It takes me a while to get the hang of it, largely because I'm loath to touch it, but soon enough I'm helping Corgie and the rest carry out the dockwand's other function, herding big gray crates of who knows what out the cargo hold in the belly of the starship and through the air to the elevators that will take them wherever they need to go next—sometimes another level of the station, sometimes the hold of another ship in another berth.

I do it all wearing a helmet with a transparent visor that curves down over my face. The helmet draws words and diagrams in the air, overlaying what I see, giving me data like what time of day it is and where the next crate needs to go. By turning my head and focusing somewhere, I can get information about whatever I'm looking at. Sweeping my gaze along the streamlined, almost organic curve of the huge ship, for example, I can access its flight schedules, crew data, cargo manifests, manufacturer's specifications, and even schematic diagrams that show me more of what it looks like than I can possibly see by just flitting around in the space between its black belly and the berth's bulkhead. I can zoom in on the other crews working the hatches fore and aft of ours, and I can even find out more about my own crewmates, though I don't feel right about prying. But it is a good way to learn everyone's name, which I manage before the start of our first break.

Is this the world my crewmates walk through every waking moment of every day, with intimate information about everything they see just an eyeblink away? We may inhabit the same great wheel in space, but these strangers live in a truly alien world, one I don't like visiting. Builder knows making motors isn't my favorite activity, good as I am at it; still, I'd rather be in my applied mechanics class with Nic and Mal than here. I'd even rather be home with Thomas—anywhere but stranded amongst the ignorantly blasphemous, wielding tools that are an offense in the sight of the Builder, being slowly poisoned by the worldview of the Sculpted.

What is Thomas trying to do to me?

Our shift is the longest day of my life. The ghostly ticking clock in the corner of my vision doesn't help.

At shift's end we deposit our dockwands, now stubby and depleted, in the rack outside the break room and file off to the showers. I'm happy to drop off my fishbowl as well, though the experience of walking in gravity without a data overlay seems somehow dreamlike and crippling as I readjust to moving about without it—almost as crippling as walking in high-g alone. It surprises me how exhausted I am. I must have used and abused every muscle in my body.

As we reach the locker room, I'm startled that our single-file queue remains intact. The women enter through the same hatch as the men. Bringing up the rear, I tell myself there must surely be a dividing bulkhead or at the very least a screen inside, but of course I was here this morning and know there's no such thing. I try to keep my eyes averted,

but just to reach my locker I must step around a woman named Soon,

who already has her suit pushed down to her hips.

The room is too small, and everyone jostles everyone else on the way to the ultrasonic showers. I stand with my burning face to my open locker, wondering if I can get away with standing here and not changing until the room is empty. Soon's bare torso blazes like a beacon in my mind. A part of me is fascinated and wants to look at it again; another part is horrified at the thought, and at the distant, epochal memories of my mother that stir, memories so ancient they seem apocryphal.

Renny, galumphing through the locker room, slaps the back of my thigh

and says, "Next shift's gotta get in, kid, Hurry it up."

Somehow I strip off the suit, deposit it in the recycler, and manage the walk to the showers. My skin crawls as I crowd into the white ceramic chamber with the others, though part of this, I'm sure, is the feel of the ultrasonics vibrating sweat and grime loose from my body. Still, I can't look higher than anyone's ankles. It's not just the naked flesh that distresses me. I'm out of my coverall in front of heathen, and that's a grave offense in the sight of the Builder. My hands hover in front of my crotch.

My hip brushes the thin blue man's; I nearly jump out of my skin, and I mumble an apology. "Don't worry about it," he says with a kind smile.

"We're all friends here."

"Yeah," Corgie says. "Just help yourself to a handful of whatever's closest."

"Or a thimbleful," says an apparent neuter named Ice IX, pointing at Corgie's flaccid penis.

"Careful. You don't want to wake the monster."

Mijk, a muscular man with a series of knobby lumps down his back, says, "I do. Someone ran all the lotion out of my dispenser."

"And apparently he wants it back," Soon says with a giggle.

Corgie wipes his mouth. "Come and get it," he says, and his penis flares to enormous size, all ridged and quivering. It is a monster.

I turn away, blushing. But something strange has begun to happen. I don't feel comfortable exactly, but I do feel somewhat invisible, with less of the compulsion to run and hide than comes in the cleansing room at gymnasium. I'm able to let my eyes roam some, taking in the female bodies as well as the male, plus two or three I find less determinate and the entirely genderless Ice IX. In the Quarter, contact between boys and girls is strictly regulated and chaperoned, even during courtship; a situation like this is as unthinkable as a motor assembling itself from raw ore. I have more answers now than I know what to do with to what minutes ago was only a compelling mystery.

I almost don't want the shower to end, but when the thought takes form I realize the Wrecker is already getting his claws into me. How much easier a time of it he has here than inside the Quarter! Despair

washes over me. How will I ever survive this?

Clean, but with a film of shame clinging to my exposed skin, I trail the group back to the lockers. I've pulled on my underall and my coverall and am about to put my cap on when a tall, trouserless man named Twenty plucks it deftly out of my hands.

Inclination 33

"What's this for, some kind of uniform?" he asks, turning the cap this

way and that. "You got another job?"

My muscles seem to seize up, and the bottom falls out of my soul. So much for invisibility, Renny is gone; I don't know where to turn for help. Heat and mortification radiate from the top of my uncovered head as Twenty's Sculpted hands defile my cap.

"No, you ramscoop," Corgie says, taking the cap, "he's a Wheelie. Don't

you know anything?"

And now he's passing it to someone else, who's asking why there's a triangle on it if I'm a Wheelie, and now it goes to someone else, and now it's flying through the air past my face, and now again the other way. I reach for the cap, but it's snatched by the knobby-spined Mijk.

"Wheelie, huh?" he says. "Those are like Christers, right? How come

you're named after a traitor. Wheelie?"

"Judas betrayed the Builder," I say quietly. I want to sound dangerous, but even I can hear the guayer in my voice. "Jude was a different apostle."

"Jude, Judas, Peter, penis-whatever, Think this'd fit me?"

Mijk's about to slip the cap onto his head, and I'm about to shout something, maybe do something I'll regret, when a half-dressed woman named

Beneficent Sunrise takes it from him.

"Mijk, it doesn't stretch. It's not smart enough to fit your thick skull."

"Then what good is it?"

Beneficent Sunrise turns the cap over. She studies the inclined plane symbol. "Never seen something made from dumb fabric before, Interest-

ing the way it feels. Almost real."

Her frank curiosity defuses my anger. Or is it the sight of her full, bobbing breasts? They fill me with an emotion I can't quite put a name to. Not desire, not quite, but something as sharp in its poignancy. I wonder what they feel like.

The blue man picks my cap cleanly out of her grip. Holding it by the vi-

sor only, he puts it in my hand. My fingers clutch it spasmodically.

"Real like your tits, Sunny?" he says to the woman.

"Go deplete your wand," she says in the general laughter, but she's

smiling with everyone else.

Weak with humiliation and relief, I cover my head and turn to rummage in my empty locker. Around me, my crewmates casually hide their nakedness.

The blue man is called Haun Friedrich 4, but the fishbowl taught me he prefers to go by Derek Specter. He's in the trial period before a legal

name change.

The idea that one may choose one's own name is as strange to me as everything else about the Sculpted. What would I choose if I were to name myself? Paul? Luke? Timothy? None of them work. I can't imagine learning to answer to any name but Jude. That's me. That's who I am.

I'm standing in the gangway outside the locker room, having lingered there until the arriving crew forced me out. People edge past me in both directions. I'm trying to remember which way I came this morning, fighting a growing sense of panic, when Haun—Derek—touches my shoulder with blue fingers.

"Know where you're going?" he asks with an easy grin.

"Er. . . rimward," I say, feeling the blood heat my cheeks.
"Yes, that would almost certainly be correct." Derek leans against the bulkhead near me, a little too close, arms folded and eyes bright. His skin is the blue of Enoch's fabled seas, and his irises glow like bits of its sky. "Do you need any help getting there?"

I look down at my gray nonslippers. "I guess I do," I say, embarrassed at the prospect of this ostentatiously abnormal creature rescuing me

twice in the same ten minutes.

Derek gazes at the opposite bulkhead, cupping his chin. "Wheelieville, I presume," he says. He gives me a sidelong glance, apologetic but not self-conscious. "The Machinist Quarter I mean."

"Uh, yeah."

His eyes narrow. "Let me just find it on the map."

"What map?" I say. His glance this time is mildly reproving, and I let

out an abashed "Oh.

"We just need to get you to Elevator Seven, Eight, or Nine," Derek says after a moment. "That's probably the trickiest part of the route. And I happen to be going the same way, if you don't mind company."

My feet are itching to move. I'd rather he just point me in the right direction and let me go my way, but I'm too tired to argue. I shrug my ac-

quiescence.

As we set off down the narrow way, Derek says over his shoulder, "You were good in there today. Not everyone adjusts to null-gee that quickly. I think even Renny was impressed."

He looks back expectantly, but since I'm not sure what I'm supposed to

say to this, I don't answer.

"Corgie gave you some shit, I know," Derek says, "but you should have seen him back when he started. Talk about an ostrich. Was this your first time with an overlay?"

"Yes"

"I remember when I was first getting used to it. It was strange to turn it off and not see labels everywhere I looked. You must be going through the same thing. You probably haven't ever used Geoff before either." At my blank look, he grins. "Yeah, we'll have to teach you how to use Geoff. Then next time you need to get somewhere you won't have to put up with me running off at the mouth."

"What's Geoff?" I ask.

"Info daemon on the public net. You've really been sheltered, haven't you? Geoff's mostly for travelers and transients—anyone offline, really, so you can use him too. He'll answer any question you have, if he has the answer and you're older than ten. And as long as it's not private or classified."

Derek keeps looking back at me with an expression like he's trying to tell me something significant and Tm just not getting it. I feel dumb, and my skin's been crawling ever since the word "daemon" anyway. "I—thanks, but that doesn't sound like something I ought to be messing with."

He gives me one more look, then shrugs. "Suit yourself," he says. "But

Inclination 3.

you do have a right to whatever information you want. You only have to ask."

We take the next couple of turns in silence, me adrift in an uneasiness

I can't quite put my finger on.

"So what's a nice Machinist like you doing in a job like this anyway?"
Derek asks at last. "I thought you were supposed to stick to your own
turf, not venture out amongst the unwashed."

The corridors are wider now, the crowds thickening, and Derek, walking beside me, speaks too loudly for my comfort. "Commerce with the Sculpted isn't forbidden," I say a little defensively, keeping my voice low. "It's inst... discouraged. I guess. It's—there's a lot of danger, spiritually."

"I always wanted to be a spiritual hazard," Derek says. "You probably

shouldn't even be talking to me, should you?"

"Um . . ." I'm looking around, anywhere but at him. There are unholy forms and faces and sounds and smells everywhere. "Not really, not like this."

"So why are you? I mean, in the larger sense. Why are you here at all?

Why do you have this job?"

I sigh. 'I didn't exactly have a choice," I say, cursing my inability to hold my tongue. "Thomas, my father, he's our ward trader, which means he goes out and sells whatever we build or manufacture. That's so the ward can meet its obligation to the Guild."

"Which is saving up to get off Netherview Station and continue its fa-

bled trek to Enoch. I've read about it."

I look at him, nonplussed. We know so little about the Sculpted, I somehow can't get over the fact they know anything about us. "But business isn't so good," I continue. "As trader, my father has to pay the rest of the ward first, before he takes his share, but lately there's not much left over. In fact, I think there may not be anything left over. He's been trying for months to get me a job outside the Quarter, and believe me, that means things are grim."

"Of course they are," Derek says. "Who wants primitive toys made from

primitive materials?"

"They're not toys!" I say, turning on him, thinking of the motor I've been

building for some weeks now. "It's serious work! It's sacred!"

"Hey, hey, I'm sorry." We're now at the elevator bay, waiting, and Derek puts his hands up as if to ward off my anger. I see for the first time that his palms and the pads of his fingers are a rich green, fading into blue at the edges. "I didn't mean it like that. But you have to realize that's how most people see what you do. If it has no practical use, it must be a toy."

"It does have a practical use," I say. "You people are just too stiff-necked

to humble yourselves and admit it."

Derek nods. "Or you might say we've put away childish things."

This reference to the Manual startles me. The elevator opens as I'm groping for a suitable reply, and we crowd in with several other commuters, including a woman who has tentacles where her fingers should be. Derek spends the ride staring straight ahead with the barest of smiles on his lips.

I'm still smarting when the elevator opens on Six. I'm about to say that

I think I can find my way from here, but Derek steps out with me into the

"Tve been meaning to ask," he says, "what is the significance of the tri-

angle on your clothing? It's an inclined plane, right?

"Um, right," I say, "That's the ward I belong to."

"You're lucky you're not in Screw," he says. "You'd never hear the end of it at work."

"So, er," I say, stumbling a little as we step onto the counterspinward slidewalk, "I guess you understand the Inclined Plane is one of the Six Fundamental Machines."

"I've heard that rumor somewhere." Derek says.

"Well, they're also symbols. This one represents the obliqueness of our approach to the Master Builder. No matter—"

"You mean God, right?"

"You might call him that," I say.

"I might, And again, I might not."

He has a way of continually derailing me and looking pleased about it that I find entirely infuriating. "No matter how shallow the angle," I say, soldiering on, "the Inclined Plane leads us ever upward, and though it may take eons, eventually we'll reach the level of the Builder."

"Sounds suspiciously like the Tower of Babel," Derek says. "And didn't God punish the Babylonians for trying to approach him in just that way?"

"Their approach was more direct, and completely literal," I say, my voice heating up. "We're not talking about a literal approach. Ours is metaphorical. We approach the Builder by understanding and manipulating his six aspects."

"Td have thought he'd have more respect for the direct approach. You know, just wrap an inclined plane around a big pole and climb to heaven." He waggles his blue eyebrows at me, eyes twinkling. "Maybe what offended him about it was the metaphorical significance of it. Maybe the Babylonians were really saying God could screw himself, and that's why he gave them all a good tongue-lashing."

The delight he derives from such extreme statements takes my breath away. "You can't approach the Builder in anything but a metaphorical

wav!" I sav.

"Then why let yourselves be literally constrained? Why confine your-

selves to what you can build from six fairly arbitrary machines?"
"The machines aren't arbitrary! They're the six aspects of the Builder."

"They are arbitrary, and not all of them are even that fundamental. The screw we were just talking about—like I said, it's just an inclined plane wrapped around an axle. The pulley's a special case of the wheel and axle, and the wedge is just another way of looking at an inclined plane."

I wipe fatigue sweat from my forehead. He's hitting uncomfortably close to blasphemous thoughts I've entertained myself, which may explain my vehemence in denouncing them. "Every aspect partakes of the others to some extent," I say, but I sound more shrill than certain.

"Seems to me that if there really is a god, you could find some far more useful metaphors for the way he operates if you'd just reach deeper than your six machines."

He exits the slidewalk and I follow, belatedly realizing we've arrived near the PM Gate. To my relief and chagrin both, I've been so focused on the conversation that I haven't paid much attention to the nightmarish creatures around me, nor to the riotous greenery. But I notice them all now and feel hemmed in.

"We're not meant to reach deeper," I say, hurrying to keep up with

Derek's long gait in the swarming crowd.

"Then you'll never achieve godhood, now will you?" Derek says. He pauses near the unadorned hatchway that leads to the Machinist Quarter. "Well, here you are."

Bathed in sweat, I purse my lips. "Thanks, uh . . . thanks for getting

me here."

"The pleasure was all mine." He makes as if to move on, but stops. "I meant to tell you before, I thought you handled those jokers in the locker room about as well as you could have. Just don't let them know they're getting to you and they'll leave you alone soon enough. They're not really mean, just exemplars of what I call the indolent uninformed. Learning new things is such a trivial process they don't even make the effort."

"Like the Israelites and the fiery serpents," I say.

Derek blinks, his eyes losing focus. "Interesting," he says after a moment or two. "Numbers, chapter twenty-one. If the ones who were bitten only gazed upon Moses's brass serpent, they would live. All they had to do was look. You know, there's good sense to be found in that book here and there."

"The miracle is," I say, "even a gentile can look and see it."

Derek laughs long and loud. It makes me feel clever and proud, though why I should care about looking clever to this mockery of a man baffles me. "Touché, Jude," he says. "See you tomorrow at the orifice."

He studies some resource invisible to me, and then he's off, a lean blue figure vanishing into a teeming, grotesque jungle. I'm reminded that he inhabits a world even more strange than this physical one, and that when the two of us look at an object we each see a vastly different thing.

"Selah, Derek," I say under my breath. I pull the lever and pass through the Gate, wondering what he sees when he looks at me.

The cleanliness, calm, cool, and quiet of the Quarter stand in stark contrast to what I've left behind. It's evening by our clocks; we run here on only one shift. The few Machinists out and about look at me strangely as I pass from outside. It should feel good, this homecoming after an eternal shift away, this shedding of weight, this lightness, this cooling of my sweat, but I find myself keyed up and restless before I've even reached the branching to Wheel and Axle. I know Thomas will be waiting for me, wanting to know how the day went, but I can't confine myself at home just yet. Instead I lower my head and trudge to gymnasium.

The machines are manned mostly by Levers, all older than I, but one station opens up before long. I do my best to complete the ritual properly, pitting every muscle group against the pulleys as I rehearse the Builder's Code in my mind, but I'm barely into the first canto before my sore muscles are quaking. What's more, I can't keep my thoughts focused. My

mind keeps reaching back to worry over images of naked flesh-some-

times colored naturally, sometimes blue or green.

One by one the Levers are finishing up and heading to the cleansing room, some of them whispering and giving me looks as strange as the ones I got outside from the Sculpted. I rush to try to complete the minimal requirements before the place fills up with Inclined Planes, but in vain. I'm not quite done when Nicodemus and another Plane named Amos arrive. I see them from across the room, over the tops of three ranks of machines. I duck my head but too late. Nic spots me and hurries over.

The station next to mine is empty, abandoned just moments before. Nic, his face cautiously friendly, slides into the seat, leaving Amos to fidget

awkwardly in the aisle before us. "Selah, Jude," Nic says. "Selah," I say, mouth dry.

Nic begins some warm-up stretches of his arms and back. "You weren't at schola today," he says.

I look straight ahead, pumping away with my arms in bellows mode, but Amos is right there staring at me, so I focus on my knees instead, "No," I say.

"Malachi heard you were outside," Nic says.

"Yeah, at the hub," Amos says.

"He said you had a job."

A wary hope fills Nic's voice, but whether it's hope that the rumors are true or simply hope that I'll talk to him, I can't tell. Either way, I can't look at him. I can't look at his golden hair, his glistening shoulders, his wise blue eyes. But I can't not answer.

"That's right," I say gruffly. "I guess you won't see me much in class

anymore."

"Is it true about the Sculpted?" Amos says. He's a skinny kid and he practically dances from foot to foot. "They drink blood instead of water?" "Amos, I see a free machine over there," Nic says with a jerk of his head.

"But-"

"I'm nearly done here," I say.

"Better hurry, Amos."

I can't see Nic's face, but I hear the tone of warning in his voice, and I see the answering expression of querulousness on Amos's face. Amos stalks off, even as I fight down the unwelcome surge of warm emotion in my chest.

I rest for a twelve-count, saying nothing, then embark on another bel-

lows set.

Nic has launched into a set of cherrypickers. "So what's with you, Jude?" he says between reps.

"What do you mean?"

"You've been avoiding me for a couple of weeks now. What did I do?"

I sigh, clinging to the handgrips and letting my upper body sag. "It's not vou. Nic."

"Then what is it? Is it about this job?"

What am I supposed to tell him? That I've started to worry I like him too much? I can hardly express the thought even to myself.

"It's not about the stupid job," I say, though I'm aching to tell him about

everything I've seen and done today. I cut my set short and stand up, infuriated. "Great Builder, you're so-so-oh, flashcan it!"

I rush to the cleansing room with all the dignity I can muster, which isn't much, aware of all the eyes on me. In the quick glimpse I caught of Nic before I fled, there was hurt and concern. He hadn't yet broken a sweat.

I try to put him out of my head among the straggling Levers in the steam-filled shower. I try to conjure the illusion of camouflage I felt in the showers at the hub, as if I could hide myself amongst my Sculpted crewmates and never be seen. Here I feel anxious and wrong, like I don't belong. But I certainly don't belong there.

Scanting my cleansing, I dress quickly and hurry into the main corridor. The crowds here are about as thick as they ever get, but seem downright sparse compared to outside. People stride lightly from their duties back to their branches, men and women, boys and girls, as evening stretches toward the dinner hour. I envy them their apparent lack of care.

"Jude, Jude," hails a gentle voice, and I raise my head. I hadn't realized

my neck had bent as if in stronger gravity.

It's Sariah, a Pulley my age who's walking the other way. "Oh, selah," I

She takes my sleeve and draws me to the side of the corridor, "Missed you at schola," she says, voice low. Not that we have any of the same classes, but the boys and girls do see each other at lunch. Often I've wished I could learn the simpler skills the girls ply, like producing rough fabrics on machines the men construct, but the one occasion on which I expressed such a desire to my father is one I'm not likely to forget. I was younger then and hadn't learned better.

"I wasn't there," I say tiredly.

"I know," she says, a look of eager horror on her face. "You were outside.

Helena saw you go this morning. So what was it like?"

My eyes are already straying down the corridor toward escape. How can I explain what it was like today? I'm too confused. "It's the Wrecker's workshop out there, truly," I say, pulling away. "Look, I'm sorry, but I need to get home."

She lays a cool hand on my arm. She's very pretty with her enviably long yellow hair, and she's nearly as tall as I am. "Jude, what's wrong?" she asks, her face close to mine, eyes filled with concern. "Was it that hor-

rible? You can tell me."

I want to weep. I have friends, sure, or I did, but what I've never had is someone I can confide in, someone I can really trust and open up to. That's all I want.

"Sariah-"

I feel her eyes searching my face, but I can't quite meet her gaze. "What is it?" she says.

"I-" Am I really going to say it? She's always been nice to me, kind. I glance up quickly. "What do you think about Nic?"

"Nicodemus?" A little crease appears between Sariah's fine eyebrows. "He's okay, he's nice, Why?"

I shake my head, my stomach turning inside out, "It's just-vou know, he's such a great guy . . ."

I trail off as her eyes get a little wider. "Oh," she says quietly, almost in wonder.

"I mean, he's been my best friend for such an incredibly long time," I

say

She nods slowly, focused on some inner vision. "No, no, I see. I get it."

"So, you know . . .

"Who would have thought?" The ghost of a pensive smile touches the corner of her mouth. She kisses me suddenly on the cheek. "Thank you, Jude. Thank you. I'll talk to you later."

With that she trails off down the corridor, yellow hair billowing in the quarter-g, leaving me to wonder desolately what in space just happened.

Thomas is waiting for me at the cabin, reading the Manual. He looks pointedly at his chronometer as the hatch closes behind me. "I expected you sooner," he says.

"I stopped for devotions on the way back," I say. "I thought I might be

too tired later

He nods, accepting this, and I breathe a sigh of relief. "How was it today?" he asks.

I shrug. "Fine, I guess."

"Did you work hard?"

"I think I did."

"Crew treat you okay?"

I take off my cap and rub my head. I don't want to get into it all with Thomas. "They were fine, They didn't pay me much mind."

Thomas closes his Manual, a finger marking his place. You be polite around them, Jude, but keep your thoughts to yourself. That's the way to stay true among the Sculpted."

"I will," I say, though already I feel duplicitous.

Thankfully, that seems to close that subject. The only other thing Thomas seems to want to know before he goes back to his reading is when I expect to be paid—something I haven't given much of a thought to. I assumed that was something he would have worked out with Renny already.

I prepare our dinner on the foldout stovetop, a stew of ground meat, beans, and vegetables. The activity proves more calming and centering to me than devotions did. But that night as I drift toward sleep, my mind keeps turning back to the women in the locker room, and to the wooden chest bolted to the deck not two feet from my head. Kaiya's chest.

The Screw is a peculiar machine, partaking directly as it does of aspects of the Axle, the Inclined Plane, and the Wedge, and often requiring application of the Lever to fulfill its purpose. This is fitting, given its function as the aspect that both joins together and elevates, and as a representation of the way in which men and women join together in holy communion with the Builder to ignite the spark of life.

Sacred as it is, I've always been a little embarrassed by the Screw, a little wary of it. Maybe if that were my ward I'd have a better understanding of it, a healthier attitude toward it, but I've never been quite comfortable with its symbolic freight. Love and apotheosis strike me as less the Screw's nature than doing violence to whatever surface it encounters.

I find it difficult to credit that I will ever come to completely trust and adore the Screw.

My work schedule is seven days on and three off—one full s-week as reckoned by the Sculpted. My first "weekend" falls on a Thursday through Saturday by the Guild calendar, which means schola every day while I'm supposed to be taking a break. Neither my long stretches without a day of rest nor my falling behind at schola seems to bother Thomas much, but it bothers me. When I dare bring this up, he tells me the Builder is blessing us for our sacrifice—though I don't see what sacrifice it is that he's making.

By my second s-week on the job, I've begun to feel comfortable and confident in null-g, and competent if not so comfortable with my fishbowl's graphic overlay. It's as if I'm looking at a raw and exposed layer of reality that should more properly be covered, or at the very least from which I should avert my eyes—though, just as in the locker room with my crewmates, doing so is practically not an option. I am on friendly terms with most of the crew, even if I can't quite bring myself to consider any of them friends. We're too different for that, both in our worldviews and in our expectations of what friendship means. For one thing, they don't seem to have a problem with the occasional tweaking of one another's anatomy in the showers. I do, as they have learned.

I have spent most of my lunch hours and several more walks home chatting with Derek. Despite the fact that he's so obviously unlike me, he has a directness, a curiosity, and a willingness to take my arguments seriously that I can't help but like, even if I can't always effectively rebut the points he makes. I consider him a goad to make me apply myself more diligently to my studies. I retain the faith that answers exist to his objections, and if I can't find them and express them articulately then I'm hardly a worthy ambasador for the Guild.

It's end of shift on Sevenday of my second s-week on the job when Renny calls us together in the break room. "Got some news, little stevies," she says, executing a sort of four-handed cartwheel up a chair to perch on her favorite table. The animated chatter anticipating our weekend break quicks dawn.

"Fourday and Fiveday next week we've got a special assignment coming up for anyone who wants in on it. Berth A-11, prospecting ship full of scientific samples. Very delicate, both the ship and the cargo. Berth's gonna be fully evacuated, so there's hazard pay, but only those of you rated for vacuum will be eligible. If you don't want in, that's fine—we'll have plenty to do here. But if you want in and you're not vacuum-rated, it's not too late to get that way. You can even take shift time to do it without getting docked. I just need to see your certification first thing Threeday if you want in. Understood? All right, that's it."

Renny draws me aside as the others file off to the showers. "This is a good opportunity, kid," she tells me in a low voice. "You're a good worker,

and you sure don't want to miss out on triple pay."

She's right, I don't. I can imagine how happy Thomas will be to see the extra credits. "How do I get vacuum-rated?" I ask, watching two tiny, distorted me's in her silvery everlobes. "Is there a test I take or something?"

"Not, er, not really," Renny says. "What it mostly entails is getting your lungs and eyes and ears vacuum-hardened. You'd be wearing a pressure suit in the berth, of course, but if it should fail you could suffocate before we got you out of there and repressurized. Regs don't let us subject you to that risk."

My breath catches. "What you're talking about—that would mean Sculpting, wouldn't it?"

"Just a small bit, internally."

The pay would be welcome, but I have to shake my head. "No offense,

but I can't do that. I'm very sorry."

Renny shrugs, an elaborate motion of her hind shoulders. My reflection dances crazily in her eyes. "What can I say, kid? It's your choice, and I sure won't think any worse of you for it. But don't make the decision now. Think about it over the break. Get the details from Geoff. Talk to your old man. see what he says."

"Right." I say. "I already know what he'd tell me."

"Thomas ain't a bad guy, for a Wheelie, Talk to him, kid,"

All the way to the showers, cringing, I can hear Thomas telling me the Westers's in me. But I can't quite shake Renny's insistence that I bring it up with him

That evening over our humble dinner I blurt it out before I can reconsider: "Renny says there's a special job next week. Extra pay, and she's pushing me to do it."

Thomas puts down his fork. "And?" he says, glaring at me over the table.

"And . . . I'd need some small modifications. Vacuum-hardening."

Thomas bows his head. Today's a Saturday in the Quarter, what would in other circumstances have meant half a day at schola for me and a morning of light community service for him. But neither of us follows a normal schedule now, and we're each exhausted from the labors of the

day. I wait for him to speak, not chewing, heart in my throat.

Not that I don't know the right answer. I only have to ask myself what the Builder would say, Or my mother, I think, the tip of my nonslipper grazing the wooden chest beneath the foldout table that spans the width between the bunks. The chest contains Kaiya's clothing, which, despite the reg against storage of unnecessary mass, Thomas has never been able to bring himself to recycle. It's almost as if he's waiting for her to come back. I'm not, though. I don't have many firm memories of Kaiya, and, in fact, Thomas has told me so often that my mother is with the angels now that that's how I nearly always picture her: dressed in spotless white with huge feathered wings furled above her, looking down on me from on high. I know what she would think if I broached the topic of transfiguration. I know what she does think, in whatever level of the Builder's mansion she's watching me from.

At last Thomas forks a bite of boiled potatoes and carrots into his

mouth and peers at me, practically through me, from under lowered

brows. "You told her no, right?"

I flinch a little. It takes a moment for me to realize he's talking about Renny, not Kaiya. "Of course," I say. My words feel defensive, as if he's somehow already forced me to lie to him.

"Wrecker take that woman, anyway." He shovels more food into his

mouth and chews silently for a few bites.

When he speaks again his voice and his eyes, unexpectedly, have softened. "Son, I know they teach us at temple never to compromise with the world, to always live as if we're with the Builder in his mansion, but in practice that's just impossible. We all make compromises—we have to, or we couldn't get by. We couldn't live. The tricky part—no, the hard part is knowing what's okay to compromise and what isn't. You have to figure out where that dividing line is—and then stay well back from it. When you try to walk it . . . ?

Thomas folds his hands together and stares down at the table. "Jude, son, I can tell you what happens. You fall. You tell yourself you won't, but you do." He clears his throat, lips compressing almost convulsively. "I just want you to be happy. Maybe that's not what this world is for, but Builder

knows it's what I want for you."

His eyes rove this way and that, never meeting mine, and he clears his throat again. Once upon a time, this would have been where I edged around the table to give him an awkward hug. Tonight I can't. My soul cries for him, but I'm not a little kid anymore, and I just can't.

We finish our meal in silence.

The next day is temple, the first Sunday in three Guild weeks I've been off work. Thomas and I sit toward the back of the long, low chapel, which sits near the AD Gate at the opposite end of the Quarter from the PM Gate. The bulkheads are of brushed gray metal, with three of the Six Machines etched on the left wall, three on the right, and the carpenter's square on the wall behind the pulpit.

Inclined Plane Ward meets third every Sunday, in the late-morning slot. During Foreman Saul's sermon after the sacrament, I spot Nicodemus several rows ahead and to the right. What caught my eye was his golden head tilting back as he smiled wide at something the person next to him had whispered in his ear. The person next to him has long, shin-

ing yellow hair.

The person next to him is Sariah.

I blink hard for the next several minutes. I shift and fidget through the rest of the sermon. The pew is cold and rigid—dumb, unyielding matter—and no matter how I try I can't get comfortable. I'm supposed to meet the foreman for my private instruction after church, but when the service ends I rush back to the cabin instead, with a vague excuse to Thomas about my stomach.

Two full days of schola still ahead, catching up on subjects where I'm falling further and further behind, before I get to return to work. I don't

know how I'm going to make it.

Wednesday comes at last, Oneday to the rest of the station, and in the break room in the early morning Renny reminds the gathered crew that we have only two days left to sign up and show vacuum certification if we want in on the special gig. She looks my way but I duck my eyes. Funny—I've spent the past two days at schola avoiding Nic and looking forward to Oneday, and now that it's here it looks like I'm going to spend the day avoiding Renny. I'm such a bent nail I can't stand myself.

Our client today is a Thunder-class starship, Colder Equation, which we load with supplies bound for the exomorph colony at Van Maanen's Star. It's hard work but mostly mindless, and I find my cares evaporating for the first time in days. I feel best at midshift when we break for lunch, but the rest of the day is marred by the clock in the corner of my vision.

ticking down the minutes until I return to gravity's embrace.

At shift's end, after showers, I ask Derek if he'd like to go somewhere for food. He's invited me to eat after work several times now, but I've worried not just that Thomas would find out but that I wouldn't be able to find anything appetizing in the public cafeterias. Tonight, though, I'm desperate enough to talk that I think I can overcome my food objections.

tions.

Delighted, Derek leads me all the way to a dim cafeteria two levels in from the rim. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but certainly not this gloomy cave with the dark red walls and the low ceiling. Quiet, lilting string music plucked out by unseen hands drifts on the air, which smells gently dank and laden with minerals. Thick pillars and curtains of leafy plant life obscure the view from one end of the place to the other, though here and there I can see tables of two, three, or four, the sometimes asymmetrical faces of the patrons lit from below by flickering orange light. Perhaps it's the dimness, but I no longer find their deformities as hideous as I did at first.

A woman in a lumpy black cowled robe leads us through the compact maze of foliage to a table against a black-painted bulkhead studded with white pinpricks. It isn't until we take our seats in form-fitting smart-matter chairs that I realize the bulkhead isn't a bulkhead at all, but a view-port—a hole punched through fifteen centimeters of metal and plugged with glass or something like it.

"Wheel and Axle," I murmur, stunned. I can't take my eyes from the

bright, nail-hard stars.

"Netherheim and Freya should come into view before you're finished," the cowled woman says. "That's a sight to behold." She makes an arcane gesture in the air. "Now, let me call your attention to today's specials."

"Perhaps a . . . hardcopy menu would be in order for my friend here?"

Derek says, nodding toward me.

"Oh, certainly," the woman says before receding like smoke into the shadows.

The surface of our table glows a dim, swirling orange, making Derek's skin look like polished stone and his eyes smolder with fire. "So what do you think?" he asks.

"It's not what I expected at all. I pictured something more, well, functional from a cafeteria."

nonai nom a carcteria.

"Cafeteria, eh?" Derek's eyes sparkle with amusement. "I suppose you

could think of it that way."

The robed woman returns with a catalog of dishes listed on a single sheet of paper, and I'm shocked to discover, as Derek points out, that most of the items have been grown hydroponically. "This must be terribly expensive," I say, mouth watering. "I can't afford this, I'm sure of it."

"Relax," Derek says. "Everyone gets credit for a meal like this once a month. Ive got a couple sayed up, and you must have at least a dozen just.

sitting there, unused."

I cover my surprise and confusion by studying the menu. I have the sense of riding an iceberg in a limitless ocean, borne up by a vast bulk the composition of which I can't begin to fathom. Choosing more or less at random, I select an opener of fine pasta garnished with grated cheeses and truffle shavings, and a spiced squash tart as a main course. Derek places our orders, a process invisible to me, choosing a fruit assortment and a roulade of vegetables and nuts for himself.

He folds his hands and leans forward. "So, what's on your mind, Jude?"
"Oh, this and that," I say, and shrug. "I was thinking today about what

it would be like to live out in space."

Derek shakes his head, grinning. "We do live in space. Or hadn't you noticed?"

"No, I mean in space, like the exomorphs, just floating there in the mid-

dle of nothing."

"Well, it's not nothing. There is a structure, a lattice, to grow their colony in."

"But it's not much, and it's open to space." I didn't know there were such creatures, such people, until today. I read it on the fishbowl during work. "Can you even imagine the mods you'd need for that?"

"Serious work indeed," Derek says. "Not to be undertaken lightly."

"No one on our crew has work that serious. They all look pretty much normal, at least when they're dressed."

"The more radical mods are often specialization for particular types of

work. We're unskilled labor, our crew, Jude,"

I nod, having figured this out without really being able to articulate it.

I take a deep breath. "Derek, can I ask you something personal?"

He laces his fingers together and rests his joined hands on the table. The green of his palms has crept halfway up his arms in the time since I met him, and his ears are now tinged green as well, though I can't make the hues out well in this light. His gaze upon me is very open and direct and unsettling, more so because every day I come to know better how little I understand of his world, layered as it is above and beneath and around mine. "I don't know, can you?" he says.

"I don't know. I'll try." I've learned some things about him from the fishbowl at work without really trying—for instance, the distressing fact that he has three biological mothers—but nothing that doesn't just whet my curiosity. I look down at the glowing table and take a deep breath. "I'm just wondering if there's some, I don't know, some practical reason for your mods, something functional. You know, what the blue skin turning

green is all about."

"There's a time for love and a time to hate" Derek says with a rakish smile. "A time for blue, and a time for green."

I puff out an exasperated breath, "Do you spend all your time looking

up things in the Manual you can make fun of?

He shakes his head. "You do understand, don't you, Jude," he says animatedly, "that a book called the Bible existed long before Titus Grant slapped his own generic title on it, and that it's not exactly an obscure work in the human literary canon?"

"High Foreman Titus didn't just change the title. Under the Builder's

inspiration he clarified and corrected—'

Derek extends a finger until it almost touches my lips, waving his other hand preemptively. "Yes, fine, But you understand he didn't write the Manual from scratch"

"All right, fine, Lunderstand," I say, "So what about the color change?"

He leans back in his chair. "Right, that. It's not really anything practical. There's nothing I can point to and say my skin color accomplishes. In fact, it's mostly a random aesthetic process. I'm never sure what color's coming up peyt "

"Then why did you do it? I mean, what's the purpose?"

"It keeps me interested." Derek says, and his smile cracks momentarily. "I see me and not-me in the mirror at the same time, and there's always the mystery of what's coming next. It's as good a reason to stick around as any," He leans forward again, and to my ears his heartiness now sounds forced. "What makes you curious, friend?"

I shake my head, "I don't know, Nothing,"

"You're thinking about the job, aren't you? The vacuum job this Fourday." I look out the viewport at the stars, but the view seems to tilt and wheel beneath me, spinning my sense of balance away. "Maybe," I admit.

"You know," Derek says with a trace of his vigorous smile, "if you do it, a lot of folks on the crew are going to be disappointed. People are starting to get protective of you, and you may make them feel like they've corrupted you."

"It's not their decision." I say.

"Agreed."

A different woman brings us our opening course. A thick tail moving in counterpoint to the balanced trays in her hands protrudes from beneath her black robe. Attention to the food spares Derek and me from the burden of conversation. I'm not sure I enjoy all the lush, strange flavors on my plate, but I know I've never tasted anything so vivid. I swallow every last crumb.

Derek seems uncharacteristically fidgety between courses, but it's not until our main courses have arrived and I'm halfway through my tartexcellent-that he says, "Jude, can I ask you something?"

"Um, sure," I say between bites.

He swallows. "What is it that happened to your mother?"

The bite I've just taken feels too big going down my throat. "How do you know about my mother?"

"I'm sorry, I'm not trying to pry." He wipes his mouth with a cloth serviette that actually shows slight stains of use. "It's hard sometimes to look at you and not make the easy jumps back through your genealogy."

"My mother died when I was small, four or five," I say, setting down my fork and holding my gaze steady with great effort. "I'm not clear exactly how. My father doesn't like to talk about it, and I don't like to press him."

Derek opens his mouth, looking confused, and for a moment I have the strangest feeling he's going to tell me how it happened. I feel the sting beginning behind my eyes at the thought that he might know more about it than I do.

But what he says is: "Do you think about her much?"

I nod, "All the time,"

He looks so stricken at this that I feel I could be looking at a reflection of my own expression in a blue-tinted mirror-or, so I believe for a giddy, wildly hopeful moment, at my mother. The illusion shatters as Derek rises suddenly in his chair, takes my face in both his green hands, and leans in to kiss me on the mouth. He stares at me a second or two, an eternity, and sits back down.

Breathless, I turn to the window. Netherheim has swung into view, a giant ball of spun sugar swirled with red and yellow stripes, a fruit as sweet and bursting and sick-making as my heart inside me. I sit very still, not looking at him. My pulse is racing about a hundred klicks a second.

"I don't know if I can finish this," I say and push the rest of my tart

away.

"Jude, I'm sorry," Derek says, his eyes very steady and direct.

"Why did you do that?" I ask, Asking a question is better than yelling

or crying or hitting the table.

Derek spreads his green palms. They look black with blood in the cafeteria's hellish light. "I forgot for a minute what a kiss signifies to your people. Let myself forget, to be honest. To us—the groups I identify with, at least it can be a greeting between friends, a show of camaraderie or comfort, even the equivalent of a slap. It doesn't have to have a sexual connotation.'

"But why did you do it?"

Derek sighs. "Jude, you just seemed so sad. I couldn't stand it. Lonely and sad." He shakes his head. "You reminded me of me when I was your

age. Sometimes I wish someone had just done that for me."

Do I believe him? I'm not sure. I look out the viewport. Netherheim is just beginning to slide out of view. A cauldron of emotion, like the multicolored atmosphere of the planet below, seethes inside me. I want to storm out of the room. I want to turn a somersault in the air. I want to shake Derek by the shoulders until his head flops like a scrap doll's.

I think about Nicodemus, wondering what I ever saw in him.

"I'm sorry," I say. "Can you help me find an elevator to Level Six?"

"Of course, Jude."

The compassion and concern in Derek's voice are unbearable. So is the heartbreak.

At home, safe from the sea of wild bodies and leering faces that populate the station, I fall to my knees. I should pray to the Builder for forgiveness, for putting myself in such a compromised position, but instead I thumb the combination on the wooden chest in the middle of the deck. Thomas is still out, and with luck will be for at least another hour. He doesn't know that I long ago surfed the combination over his shoulder The lid swings back on stiff creaky decidedly low-tech hinges revealing

the layered treasures within

Reverently I lift out the first folded garment, hearing in my mind a surreal ghost of Kaiva's voice telling Thomas to keep this, she'll have no use for it where she's going. I unfold and smooth out the soft gray dress with the Inclined Plane on the bosom—then, hands trembling, pull it over my head and slip my arms through the sleeves, as I've done maybe half a dozen times before in my life.

The fabric is tight across my shoulders and under my arms-much tighter than it was the time before. There's no hope of closing the buttons at the back. This may be the last time I can manage to fit into it at all.

Sobs rise up inside me as I yearn for angel wings to bear me away

The sensation of walking spinward inside a great turning wheel like Netherview Station is a little like walking up an endless inclined plane. Because your feet are borne forward by the rotation a tiny bit faster than your head, you might feel, if you're attentive enough, as if you're leaning

slightly backward, or walking up the slightest of slopes.

By the same token, a counterspinward stroll might feel a bit like a walk downhill. But compare your slight forward angle to a tangent of the circle your feet are touching and you'll see that the attitude of your body is more like that of a person walking uphill. Thus, walk either direction inside the rim of a rolling wheel and you partake of one aspect or another of ascending an incline.

I haven't found much scriptural support for my position, and the members of Wheel and Axle in particular would call it blasphemy, but at some crossroads it strikes me that any path you follow can lead you upward.

and closer to the Builder.

I sleep badly, unaccustomed to the richness of the food in my belly. Upon rising I prepare Thomas what seems a meager and bland breakfast, all the while fearing that he will somehow sense that the chest and its contents have been disturbed. But he eats with all his attention on his Manual, and he barely bats an eye when I tell him I may end up working overtime today.

I arrive early at the hub, in time to catch Renny in her spherical office well before the start of our Twoday shift. "I want to learn more about this vacuum-hardening procedure." I tell her without preamble, "Uh, how can

I do that?"

Renny vaults out of her chair like a charged particle expelled from an atom. "If you weren't crippled you could ask from anywhere," she says, clinging to the frame of the hatch and shoving her ugly face into mine. "As it is, you'll have to use a Geoffroom. There's one not far from here." She leads me on a brisk walk. "You know," I say as I hurry to keep up

with her, "my father's pretty upset with you."

Renny looks over her shoulder and grins. "What, for telling you about the job? Oh, I heard from him. Nothing he could do about it, though. It's regs and Thomas knows it. Like he has room to complain, the way he

called in so many favors to get a barefooter like you onto the team in the first place. But he's your father and he's just following the script, same as me."

She stops before a row of three hatches, each emblazoned with the old-fashioned schematic symbol for an activated light fixture. I've passed hatches like these at many times since starting my job, but never known what they were

Renny rears up on her hind arms and pats the gleaming surface of the first hatch. "Now here's the next part of my script," she says. "This is a Geoffroom, where Geoff can tell you anything you care to ask about. He'll answer all your questions and then some. The light bulb is glowing, which means the room's unoccupied and you can walk right in. Take all the time you need, but if you're going to be here longer than the first hour of shift, have the big lug message me so I know."

She touches a panel in the center of the hatch, and it opens with a

slight hiss.

"Keep your eyes and ears open, kid," she says, and I step inside.

"Don't be afraid I won't bite"

The voice is a warm tenor and originates from no location I can see in this small, very white room. The ceiling is high enough to let me stand comfortably; my outstretched arms would nearly span the room in both dimensions. A body-enfolding chair like you might find at the medic's rests at the center of the deck. Panicked, I turn—to find the hatch has sealed noiselessly behind me. I can barely see its outline.

"Have a seat, Jude," the voice says. "We've got a lot to talk about."

The air is warm, but my skin prickles cold and hard. "Where are you?" I say. "How do you know my name?"

"I've known you since you were born, Jude. I'm glad we're finally getting a chance to talk. This happens so rarely with members of your Guild. But we'll talk more comfortably if you sit. Please."

Blasphemy! my mind cries. False gods! But I ease myself down into the chair, letting the cushions take hold of me. I feel the chair adjust to my

size, and carefully I lay my head back in the niche that fits it.

A man appears before me. A pot-bellied man with flowing white hair and a bushy white mustache, dressed in a billowy white coverall. A man carrying a wooden carpenter's square, "Selah," he says.

I start in alarm, but the man makes calming motions as he bends over

me. "The Builder," I gasp.

He shakes his head. "If you see me in the likeness of the Builder, it's only because that's your strongest conception of a figure of benevolent wisdom. Not to aggrandize myself at all." He looks down at the carpenter's square in his hand. "This probably doesn't help matters." He tosses the square over his shoulder, and it vanishes.

"Who are you?" I say, struggling to sit up.

The man crackles and flashes transparent. "This'll be less disorienting if you stay down in the chair," he says. "For both of us."

Suspiciously I lie back, and the image solidifies. In fact, I can feel the man as he presses a comforting hand to my chest and pushes me down.

"I'm Geoff," he says. "No last name, but I can give you a version number if you're really interested."

He smells faintly of sweat smoke and some kind of musky perfume "I

don't know what you mean." I say.

"I know," he says with a smirk. He pulls up a chair from nowhere, seats himself near my knees, and crosses his legs. "But you came here because you wanted to ask me something. So go ahead. Ask me anything you like. Ask me as much as you like. That's what I'm here for."

"What are you?" I ask.

"A very sophisticated information retrieval system. Once upon a time, you might have called me a search engine, but I'm much more than that. I'm something of a diagnostician as well, and a physician, and a surgeon, and a teacher, and a tutor. A diplomat, a translator, an ombudsman. A legal advisor, and an advocate too. And I play a mean hand of gin."

"Where did you get the name Geoff?" I'm thinking of Derek and his

name change. "What does it mean?"

Geoff strokes his mustache. "Nothing, really. I just liked the sound of it.

It seemed to me to suit me somehow. Where did you get your name?"

I blink, "From the Manual."

"Be glad you didn't end up Nebuchadnezzar."

Maybe this is where Derek learned to be so cheeky. "How is it I can see

you? It has something to do with the chair doesn't it?"

"It has plenty to do with the chair, and with its ability to create a microwave interface with your visual cortex. I can give you a more detailed technical specification if you like, but I imagine you have more pressing questions you'd like to ask."

I'm delighted in spite of myself, and I raise my head out of the cradle several times in succession just to watch Geoff flicker in and out of exis-

tence.

"Careful," he says, rising from his illusory chair. "You'll make yourself sick."

He's right. My head has started pounding and the room whirls. My stomach feels none too steadfast in its grip on breakfast. I lie back and Geoff strokes my forehead. His cool fingers fail to disturb the swelling droplets of perspiration. I take deep breaths, digging my fingers into the padding of the armrests.

"Tell me about this vacuum-hardening process my boss keeps telling

me about," I say, eyes squeezed shut. "How does it work?"

"There's not a lot to it," Geoff says. In ow does it work:
"There's not a lot to it," Geoff says in a reassuring tone. "What it does is construct around your lungs a sort of a cellular retaining wall that gets deployed on any catastrophic drop in air pressure. It actually seals shut your lungs and can temporarily prevent the gases in your bloodstream from expanding and killing you. This retaining wall is also capable of breaking oxygen atoms loose from the carbon dioxide your blood returns to your lungs, so you can effectively keep rebreathing the same old air. That's only temporary too, of course. It's like any filter—eventually it's going to get choked with carbon and fail. But you can last an hour that way, anyway. More than enough time for help to get to you. In most circumstances."

It sounds so reasonable when Geoff says it. I'm looking at him again now, and he has returned to his seat. "Is the procedure expensive?" I ask, praying the answer will be yes.

"Not at all," Geoff says. "And if you can demonstrate a need for it in the course of your job, the station covers it anyway. You do qualify, by the

way."

"Are there side effects?"

"You might feel a little short of breath after the procedure, a little dizzy and weak, but your lungs will adjust within a day or so. That's all, really."

I take a deep breath. "And the procedure itself—it sounds complicated.

How long does it take?"

"Oh, about twenty minutes," Geoff says, tilting his head to one side.

"Twenty minutes! That's all?"

"You'd have the entire shift off, though, for recovery and observation. With pax."

"But—but how is that possible?" I'm groping for words. "I mean, it's Sculpting, right? You can't just snap your fingers and it's done."

"That would be true, Jude . . . if we were starting from scratch. We're not."

Now I can't breathe, and my insides seem to freeze, "What do you-

what do you mean?"

Geoff stands up and clasps his hands behind his back. "You are what you call Sculpted, Jude, as is every other member of the Machinist Guild on Netherview Station. You've been that way since before birth, the nanodocs passed on to you via your mother's bloodstream. Your nanodocs don't do anything more than maintain reasonably good health and let me keep tabs on you. But the potential is there for more. Much more."

"But—but why?" Tears gather in the corners of my eyes. "How can you

do this to us? It's-it's monstrous!"

Geoff looks pained. "Jude, please understand what a fragile environment this station is. We have two million permanent residents and millions more who pass through every month. We can't have people running loose who aren't monitored in some way."

"But it's wrong. It's my body!"

"Jude, if I weren't helping out, your body would have broken the first time you left the Quarter. Your devotions keep your muscles strong, but the low gravity weakens your bones. You've had supplements in your food all your life to counteract the effects."

I roll my head from side to side. "Lies."

"I'm not lying, Jude."

"Not now, but all along! Everything we know, my people, it's all lies."

"I told you the first opportunity I had. Jude, you have the right to get this information at the age of ten, when you become a provisional citizen of Netherview Station—that's about thirteen and a third by your Guild calendar. Unfortunately, the Guild can keep that knowledge from you until age fifteen—twenty to you. You still have the right to ask and get answers, like you're doing now, but what good does that do most of you when you don't know you can ask?"

I'm shaking my head. "I don't believe you. That would mean-that

would mean everyone knows. All the adults—my father. Everyone knows"

"Actually, no." Geoff purses his lips sadly and lays a hand on my arm. "Just because they know they have the right to ask doesn't mean they'll actually do it. By the time they reach twenty, most of them don't want to know."

"I don't want to know!" I say, wrenching my arm through Geoff's hand

to paw the water from my eyes. "Why are you telling me this?"

Jude . .

"No! You're the Wrecker! I don't want to hear it."

Geoff sighs. "As far as I'm aware, I am not the Wrecker. In fact, I'm not certain I'm capable of telling a lie. I try my very best to do good, really."

Uncomfortably aware of how childish I'm being, I cross my arms and turn my head away from the preening phantom before me. I lie that way for some time, mind churning. When I look at Geoff again he's watching me expectantly. I feel hollow inside.

"Geoff." I say, my voice small, "can you fix my brain?"

Geoff leans forward, looking concerned. "What's wrong with your brain, Jude?"

"I\_\_I mean\_\_"

"Yes?"

"I think I'm out of true." I'm almost whispering. "Bent."

"How do you mean?"

"You know."

"Pretend I don't."

I lick my lips. "I think I like boys." The admission leaves me feeling cu-

riously flat, detached, "Can you fix me?"

Geoff tugs at his white mustache. "Jude, there are various therapy regimens I can initiate, but I don't 'fix' things like sexual inclination. Not that I'd call you homosexual at all in the sense you'd think of it. The truth, I believe, is rather more interesting and complicated than that."

My heart leaps. "What's the truth?"

"Your Guild likes to treat sexuality and gender as binary values, either this or that, one right, one wrong, no other possibilities. But the ones you call Sculpted understand these characteristics more as a spectrum of possible values, fluid and multidimensional. There's no either-or, nor even necessarily a permanent identification with any given point on the grid." Geoff spreads his hands in an eerily Builderlike gesture. "Now, this is a preliminary diagnosis only, but you would appear to me to suffer from a multivalent somatocognitive dysphoria."

"A what?" I ask, vague trepidation gnawing at my stomach.

"To put it more bluntly, your body is male, but the personality inside may be closer to the female end of the continuum. Not all the way there, of course, but more so than not."

I shake my head despite the nausea I feel, "No. no. That's ridiculous,"

"You would have learned very early to hide the symptoms—the wants and behaviors your people wouldn't find acceptable in a little boy. But that, plus overcompensation in areas of archaically male pursuit, still wouldn't make them go away." "You're crazy." The notion is offensive, repulsive, "The Builder doesn't

make mistakes like that."

"In a perfect world, maybe not," Geoff says. "But this world's anything but perfect, and we all have to come to our own accommodations with that fact. Now, I can recommend and even direct a course of therapeutic counseling, just as a starting point, and of course participation would be entirely up to-"

"No!" I shout. "Stop it!"

"Jude, let's at least talk about this for a-"

"You lying, false machine, shut up! I can't think."

Geoff folds his hands in his lap as I turn my eyes to the white ceiling, chewing the inside of my cheek, I'm furious, and terrified for my soul, to realize how easily I've been taken in by the lies of this Wrecker-spawned abomination. The right thing to do-the right degree of compromise-has never been more clear.

"I'm going to do it." I say the steel in my voice a wall holding back utter

dissolution.

"I'm sorry-do what?" Geoff asks.

"The vacuum-hardening. I'm going to do it."

"Are you sure?" He sounds dubious.

"Absolutely. But so you don't get any ideas, I'm doing it for the Guild, not for myself."

"I'm not certain what you mean by that."

"The more hazard pay I get," I say, "the more quickly my people can get off this godforsaken station."

"Your pay is yours. It doesn't have to go to your Guild."

"I don't care."

"It won't any difference," Geoff says, "The Guild's debts are considerable."

"I don't care."

"Jude, I don't want you doing this under any false illusions. The Guild owes so much money they can't even pay the interest on it. It's practically a losing proposition to keep housing them."

"Then why don't you just let them leave?" I demand, enraged.

Geoff shakes his head. "I'll tell you if you really want to know-that's my function. But you won't like it.

"I don't like it already! Just tell me."

"As you wish, I have to be concerned about the well-being of the station as a whole, and having you here serves a purpose other than economic. The existence of a permanent underprivileged social class reinforces in the minds of the rest of the population the benefits of full participation in this pseudo-socialist post-scarcity paradise of ours. Superiority breeds contentment, of a sort."

"So you're telling me my people live in poverty to provide an example

of how undesirable poverty is?"

"I told you you weren't going to like it."

My anger has shrunk to a cold, clear gem in my heart. "As if it took a supercomputer to figure that out. And I told you I'd made up my mind already."

"Well!" he says, raising his evebrows. He looks as if he's about to offer

more argument, but evidently decides otherwise. "So you give your con-

I give a curt nod. "Yes."

"So be it," Geoff says quietly. He almost sounds chastened. "I'll let your boss know you'll be occupied today, and we'll get started right away."

I arrange myself stiffly in the chair, arms at my sides, as if waiting for the lid of my coffin to close.

"You're all right from here?" Derek asks.

We're standing at the PM Gate, the smells and tumult and humidity around us as heavy as ever. His arm around my shoulder helps offset the crushing gravity. I not a little woozily and say, "It'll be easier inside.

Quarter gee."

As the end of the procedure drew near, Geoff roused me to suggest I might want a friend to walk me home. I said Derek's name before I really thought it through, but even after the fact, wondering if that had been a good idea, it didn't seem to me I really had a better option. Geoff contacted him, and Derek was there waiting outside the Geoffroom as soon as the hatch opened.

Now he takes his arm from around me and watches with concern as I make a wobbly step on my own. "Is this . . . you know . . . are you going

o be in trouble?

"How will anyone know?" I say. "There's nothing visible that's changed."

Derek looks like he's about to say something, then extends his hand instead. Green is now his predominant hue; even his irises have changed color. "Well, Jude, just in case... you've got a place to bunk down if you need it. No strings, just a place to stow your gear."

I nod, my throat thickening. I try to say thank you, but I can't. I duck

my eyes, pull the lever, and pass through the gate.

I might be imagining it, but as the gate closes behind me I almost think

I hear Derek saying, "Selah, Jude."

Inside, it's late and the corridors are empty. This is good because even in the lower grav I'm having trouble walking a straight line. Geoff told me this is nothing to worry about, that I'll feel fine again by morning, but drawing the wrong kind of attention on the way home through the Quar-

ter would be something to worry about.

The cabin is dark when I slip inside, and Thomas lies motionless in his bunk. I strip off my coverall as quietly and cautiously as possible, crank down my bunk, and slip beneath the blanket. I lie on my back, unable to relax or even close my eyes. I spent most of the day in essentially this position. Like Geoff promised, the process took only twenty minutes—though, having felt nothing, I have only his word for that—but for the rest of my shift and beyond I lay fitfully dozing as I recuperated. I suspect Geoff would have liked to keep me longer than he did, but my father would have been livid if I didn't come home all night.

My heart pounds as I suddenly become aware that Thomas is sitting up. I try to fake deep, easy breathing as Thomas stands and pads across the narrow cabin. Even talking to him right now is too exhausting a

thought to contemplate.

Inclination 5.

"Son," he says, almost a question, his voice subdued.

I crack an eye. His face is a gray smear in the darkness, gazing down on me like the cinders of a burnt-out sun.

"Son . . . Jude . . . " He sighs, breath hitching like an unbalanced mo-

tor. "I've been thinking a lot. Praying hard. I think it was wrong to send you to work. You can quit if you like. We'll get by. We'll manage.' I'm not sure he knows I'm awake, sees my eyes wide and dilated in the

dark. It's like he's talking to himself. But when he reaches down to stroke

my hair, his face draws nearer and his brows knit.

"Son?" he says, his voice quavering. "Son, what have they . . . what

His hand snaps back like the magnetic arm of a relay switch. But I have only an instant to steel myself before he shakes off the stun and whips back, seizing me by my throat and one thigh and hauling me off the bunk.

"What in the Wheel have you done?" he cries, stumbling back as I watch the indistinct room tumble crazily around me. He loses his grip on my thigh, and my knees bounce off the deck even as my windpipe grinds against his other hand. I smash sideways against the bottom of the hatch, torn loose now from both his hands, and watch in the terrible clarity of low gravity as his leg swings back in an arc that will ultimately reverse and connect with my ribs.

I've never felt revulsion before at his correctional touch, only the sort of accepting resignation born of an intimate belief in the justice of it. But now, sprawled on the deck, my skin crawls with a sense of wrongness and

violation.

Spasming, I curl myself around his leg at the moment of contact, I grab tight with both arms, I twist violently toward the hatch. Arms wheeling, Thomas hits the bulkhead face first.

The lights brighten at his startled cry, and in the sudden glare I scuttle desperately to the cabin's far corner. Thomas's face leaves a lurid red smear on the door as he slides to the deck. Dizzy, I push myself to my feet, lungs heaving, alternately holding back sobs and retches.

Thomas huddles on the floor with his arms over his head, "Oh, Builder,"

he half coughs, half wails. "What did you do?"

There's only one way he could have detected my mods. "You see it," I

say, nodding like a drunk. "You're Sculpted too, you hypocrite."

He rolls over onto one side. "I couldn't do my job otherwise," he says, wiping blood from his mouth. "The job I have to do for you and our people. You have no idea what I've sacrificed."

"If I have no idea," I shout, "it's because you never told me! You sent me out there to face the same choices, but you never told me what you chose!"

He sits up, wiping his face and examining the blood on his hand. "I told you what was right, Jude. That's my job."

"You think I can't figure that out for myself?"

"Obviously not. Just like your mother." He's breathing hard, wincing. "She couldn't make the distinction either-what one person sacrifices out of necessity, and what that spares the rest of his family. She tore us apart because of it. She left this family in shambles." He pushes himself to his feet. "And I suppose you want to join her now, Wrecker take you both."

He totters the few steps toward me. I try to rise, intending to meet his assault on my feet however it comes

When he lays hands on me, though, it's to take my elbow and help me

"The door?" I repeat, confused, "But . . . I thought . . . "

"Thought what? Thought—" Understanding dawns on his face as it hasn't yet on mine "Oh. Jude"

"What?"

"You know so much else. I thought you must have found that out too."

I feel a tremble in my chest, "Found out what?"

"About your mother. That she's . . . '

Time seems to freeze. Something terrible roars somewhere far, far

away, someplace only I can hear it.

"Son?" Something in my expression causes Thomas to release my elbow and take a step back. "Son," he says, hands up, "she was dead to us, dead in every way that mattered. She wasn't the same woman anymore. That woman died."

I fling myself at him, fists pummeling his chest like I'm a two-year-old

"I was only trying to protect you, Jude! She's a monster now! She's

Wreckerspawn!"
"Liar!" I cry, spittle flying from my mouth, tears blinding my eyes, "You

liar!"
Now he's crying too, behind his upthrust arms, but it can't be from my pathetic beating. I shove him away in disgust. He staggers and sits down

hard on his bunk. Not pausing to think, I snatch my clothing from the netted basket beside my bunk and cross to the hatch. "And now you're leaving me. too." Thomas says bitterly. "You're her son

in every way."

"Good," I say, turning the knob. "That's what I'd rather be anyway."

Good, I say, turning the knot. That's what I d'rather be anyway.

I have one last glimpse of him—hunched on his bunk in the harsh light like a wild animal, clawing at his wet, puffy eyes—and the hatch snicks shut behind me

Standing over me, Kaiya looks the same as she does in my half-waking imaginings—tall, porcelain-skinned with cascades of black hair, slightly larger than life, and no older than I remember. And those wings. Those glorious, glowing, white wings, stretching up into the inky night to touch at a point as far above her head as her head is above her feet. Each feather is as long and wide as one of my forearms. I could see her clasping me to her white-robed breast and soaring high out of the galactic plane with wings like that. She is an angel.

"Jude, first let me tell you how sorry I am," she says, leaning in so close I can count every one of her eyelashes. "I must have made a dozen recordings like this for you, at least, every time I move or make some other change, but sorry is the one thing that's always constant. That and how much I love you."

She's not here, of course, but I can almost smell the dry perfume of her hair, the oily tang of her wings. I'm in a Geoffroom, the first one I could

find, dressed and tipped back in the big chair and submerged in illusion. I can hardly believe this is happening, that this revelation has been so close to hand for so long, dormant and unguessed-at. All I had to do was ask the right question—or rather, to learn there were questions to ask at all. The magic incantation which summoned this genie forth from the bottle was, quite simply, "Where is my mother?"

"I'm not authorized to answer that directly," Geoff told me. "But I do

have a message for you."

"I wanted to bring you with me. Really I did, Jude. Not a day goes by that I don't wish I could. But because of the Guild's legal arrangements with the Station, that was impossible, and after the change I'd made I certainly couldn't stay. All I could do was hope that you reached a point—and preferably long before you reached your Guild majority—where you were able to start asking questions.

"Since you're seeing this, apparently you have.

"As I speak, you're now ten years old—thirteen by Guild reckoning. You're old enough to get this message if you ask, but not old enough that I can contact you directly. I don't know anything about you, what kind of young man you've turned into since the last time I saw you. Are you still as sweet as you were as a child, and as serious? What do you believe? What do you hope for? What do you dream? How have you changed? One thing's for certain—you must have changed some to be seeing this now. You must have made some hard choices, and you must have many more still to come.

"Tm still changing, too, Jude. I'm heading into the final phases of my exomorphological transform. When you see this, I'll probably already be homesteading in the New Bountiful Colony at Van Maanen's Star. It's a long way from here, terribly far. But that doesn't mean I won't drop it all to see you again. It won't be quick or simple, but if you want to start arranging it, just tell Geoff yes at the end of this recording, or any time afterward. A message will be dispatched to me immediately, though it may take a while to reach me.

"If you don't want to see me"—she shrugs, and her mighty wings tremble— "well, you can just say nothing. I'll never know, and I can go on as-

suming you've never seen this."

Is there really any question? Is there any doubt? "Yes, Mom," I say, feel-

ing my face crumple. "Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!"

"Tm so proud of you, Jude," she says. "You chose enlightenment over ignorance, and that's a terribly hard choice to make. I love you and I always will, no matter what. I can't wait for you to see what I've become, and I especially can't wait to see what you've become."

The Manual tells us that in the beginning the Builder decreed six fundamental machines. These are his six aspects, and all we do we must do with the Six. We need no other machines.

I believe this with all my heart. But not even my sincerest belief, I fear, is sufficient to make it true. Not when the shape of the Builder's seventh great Machine, transcending the other six, is coming clear.

The Seventh Machine is me. O.

Engineer/Novelist/Journalist Wil McCarthy is the science columnist for the SciFi channel, where his popular "Lab Notes" column has been running since 1999. A lifetime member of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, he has been nominated for the Nebula, Locus, AnLab, and Theodore Sturgeon awards, and shares partial credit for a Webbie and a Game Developers' Choice Award. His short fiction has graced the pages of magazines like Analog, Asimov's, Wired, and SF Age, and his novels include Bloom, The Collapsium, and, most recently, To Crush the Moon. He has also written for TV. Wil can be found online at www.wilmccarthy.com. In his newest tale, he looks at how uncertain we might be of gaining an education at . . .

# HEISENBERG ELEMENTARY

## Wil McCarthy

Nine Nine Two!" shouts JimmyTim Exxon in the middle of literacy block. "Five Eight! Four Nine Nine One Seven!" Everyone looks up at the clock but otherwise ignores him. That's his social security number, and everyone knows it by heart already. After hearing it every fifteen minutes

all week long, we're not even giggling anymore.

"Let's talk about ticware," Miss Solarbad had said on Monday morning, "and the various ways to avoid infection." Yeah, yeah, don't lick the flag pole don't inload from strangers don't execute neurops no matter what survival traits they seem to offen Like everyone doesn't know JimmyDim caught the bug at school, from a badly formatted toilet seat. And the week has only gone downhill from there.

Literacy block is a hundred hours long. Fortunately, it takes place in a virtual universe, with minimal leakage. Boy, I feel sorry for that me! Our time, our real time, is spent taking standardized tests, like always.

"Real education costs real money," Miss Solarbad says cryptically. "But by measuring the outcome we can change it at the elementary level.

When every chair contains a thousand children, the statistics are universal."

They're just getting ready to blow lunch in through the vents—I catch a whiff of hot-dog yappr—when the Chronarchists show up again.

"Again?" says their sergeant recluse. "What do you mean again?"

"You've been here five times today and it's barely lunch," answers Miss Solarbad.

"Oh," he says unhappily. "Great. Would you hit me with a chair to break the loop? Please?"

Guardedly: "That depends on why you're here."

"Can't say, ma'am. Prime directive."

But I'm tired of this loop, so I hit the sergeant recluse myself.

"Thanks, kid," he says, his hair shifting color from blond to brown. His voice is lower, too. Then it's down to business: he and his three priwates form a circle around Pammy TransAm, line up their funguns and turn her Hanny. Ouch. That smile's got to hurt.

"Sorry, ma'am," says the sergeant recluse to a frowning Miss Solarbad.

"We find it's the best way to neutralize inconvenient people."

"You always say that."

"Actually, ma'am, we never always said that until just now. The changes are retroactive."

"What changes? Who are you?"

"Chronarchists, ma'am, Just liberating the timeline,"

Miss Solarbad frowns. "From a happy girl like Pammy TransAm? Why on Earth? Who was she going to be?"

"President of Bitchtopia, ma'am. Very destabilizing. Now she's Union of Unconcerned Citizens"

"Oh." says Miss Solarbad, "Well, uh. Thanks?"

"All in a day's work, ma'am," he says, and ceases to ever have existed.

Brother!

Finally we get to breathe lunch, and after that a whiff of playground dust and fresh-cut grass. Then it's back to the CSAPSAT for another four

hours.
"Don't bias the statistics," Miss Solarbad reminds us sternly. "Don't think about your answers."

Pretty soon the Chronarchists are back. This time they give Pammy a speech impediment, which her extreme happiness causes her to see as a positive growth experience.

"Tank oo vey much!" she says brightly.

"Unconcerned Citizens my foot," mutters the sergeant recluse before

ceasing to ever have existed again.

Finally, finally, the school day is over and I can go play. Unfortunately my parents can't afford point-to-point, so of course I have to tunnel home as a quantum waveform, which is like completely unfair. And of course Mom is waiting for me at the collapse point, looking shrewish. Don't you love that word, shrewish?

"Your waveform shows a peak at the arcade again," says Mom.

"It's on the way," I remind her.

"It's on all possible ways," she says, like that's the end of that.

"Give me a break," I try, putting on a mature voice so she'll maybe listen for once. "It's only a 10 percent presence. I didn't even experience it at a Newtonian level."

But I get dish duty anyway, followed by more homework than there are hours to complete it. School doesn't care about the problems of working families; Mom and Dad can't afford a time compactor, so what am I supposed to do? I settle for an optic cram and dump, which utterly makes me ill, then wind down by kicking a virball around the page for half an hour in five parallel muscle groups. I think about inloading a season of TV, but I'm just too tired. I crawl into bed, utterly defeated.

There is of course something wrong with my pillow. All my dreams are

in blue, and the audio is laggy. It figures.

In the morning, Mom and Dad and Janey have run the helium chiller dry, so I'm forced to superconduct in liquid nitrogen, like that's going to decohere. If they actually loved me they'd turn the dial down, and never mind the trillion bucks. But nooso. I hate my life.

Outside, the weather is cold and rainy. Yuck. My waveform clusters un-

der trees and awnings, collapsing only reluctantly into homeroom.

The Chronarchists of course are already there, playing some kind of

scanner thing over Pammy TransAm.

"Highly effective in the third degree," says the sergeant recluse. "I was afraid of that. No amount of change is going to stop this girl. There's only one thing for it."

The priwates all nod solemnly, pulling a uniform out of nowhere and holding it up against Pammy, who like instantly has always been wear-

ing it.

"We're at your disposal, Kernel," says the sergeant recluse in a fawning kind of way.

"Let's get out of here," she says in the voice of a much older woman.
"Far future lookback, full temprum. This line's not going to liberate itself."

I stick my hand up. "Pammy? Can I come, too?"

The Chronarchists turn, noticing me for the first time. The sergeant recluse holds out his scanner, whoob whoob whoob, and lights up with surprise.

"Kernel, this is BennyJam Wheelrut, the lingerie designer!"

"It is? Oh, yeah," says Pammy wistfully. Don't you love that word, wistfully? "I went to Heisenberg with him when we were kids." She turns to me. "Benny, people are like totally wrapped around your work. They love it. They'll edit me right out of the timeline if I so much as speak..."

Oops. I get the feeling there were Chronarchists here or something, but

Mom says I've got to stop daydreaming in class.

"Today we'll be taking a standardized test," Miss Solarbad announces. And then suddenly there are three Chronarchists in the room, looking dark and blurry and scared.

dark and blurry and scared.

"Ignore us," implores the sergeant recluse. "Go on about your business."

Which is a strange thing to say, because they've been standing right there for as long as I can remember. But then—finally!—the Time Patrol shows up with funguns blazing, and for once school is, like, actually interesting. O

## THE FINAL FLIGHT OF THE BLUE BEE

## James Maxey

James Maxey tells us, "The first superhero comic book I ever picked up was Superman #279, all the way back in 1974. The Man of Steel teams up with Batgirl. I don't remember much about the plot, but I do remember thinking that Batgirl was kind of hot. I was hooked. Over three decades, I've accumulated about thirty thousand comic books. No one can say they aren't educational. All the physics and biology details I used to write 'Final Flight of the Blue Bee' have been rigorously researched and fact checked against my collection." Anyone wanting to read more of his superhero writing can track down the author's debut novel, Nobody Gets the Girl, which was published last year by Phobos.

When the old man came out of the bathroom wearing the faded costume, Honey placed her hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. The black and yellow fabric over his round stomach stretched skin-tight, revealing several inches of white, hairy flesh between his belly button and his metallic gold underwear. The sleeves and leggings of the costume sagged, as if once filled by muscles that had vanished long ago. In the center of his chest was an appliqué bee, the silver foil wings crinkled and ripped. He looked away from her, studying himself in the mirror. She wondered how he saw at all in the black mask that concealed the upper half of his face, the eyes hidden by thick, gold, faceted lenses.

"It's a little early for Halloween, isn't it?" Honey said.

"Yes," he said, frowning.

Recognizing that she'd offended him, Honey assumed her best poker

"So." she said. "You're a bee."

"Yes," he said.

"You, uh . . ." she paused, biting her lip. He showed you the money, she thought. Don't blow this. "You wanna talk about it?"

"Buzzzzzzzz," he said.

They'd let Mick Payton out of prison with a new suit and one hundred forty-seven dollars in his pocket. He'd declined the halfway house's offer to send a car to pick him up. He walked out the gate and didn't look back. It was twelve miles to the small town of Starksville. He needed the fresh air, the sunshine. Bees danced in the flowering fields as he walked past.

By that evening he'd blown half the money, starting with a T-bone dinner. The meal cost an outrageous twelve dollars. Back in 1964, you could eat out for a week on twelve dollars. Once he'd finished, he'd walked to a hardware store and spent a breath-taking fifteen dollars on an axe. Finally, the bus ticket to Collinsville, New Jersey, set him back fifty dollars. By now, he was braced for the extra zeroes that followed the prices. He tried to shrug it off. Once he reached Collinsville and the old farm, money wouldn't matter.

"You haven't heard of the Blue Bee?" the old man asked.

"Blue?" Honey asked, studying his costume, which didn't have a stitch of blue

"He was my mentor," he said. "I was his partner, Stinger."

"Okav," she said. "Stinger."

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Honey," she said, instantly regretting it. She'd spent the better part of the week practicing the name Xanadu and now she'd blown it.

"That's not your real name," Stinger said.

In a way, it wasn't. It was her childhood nickname, the name her father called her, and the fact that she would now be "performing" under the name bothered her. It also bothered her that the one honest thing about her that had slipped out of her mouth tonight was being treated as a lie.

"I suppose Stinger's on your birth certificate?" she said.

"You don't understand." The old man lowered his head, staring at his shimmering gold booties. "Our secret identities, they were important to our mission. Vital. Without them, our enemies could have . . . could have attacked our loved ones. Those of us who had loved ones."

The seriousness of his voice, the sad sincerity—Honey suddenly understood that this wasn't a joke. She raised her hand to cover her mouth, but it was too late. The lauchter exploided from her.

it was too late. The laughter exploded from her.

The family farm looked as if it hadn't been visited since 1964. Thickets of brush covered the fields where the cows once grazed. The old barn

leaned at a fifteen degree tilt, and most of the roof had fallen in. Out back, the once white hive boxes were black with mildew, half rotted. Only the tiny, three-room farmhouse stood unchanged.

Mick used the axe to break the door open. Inside, the kitchen was exactly as he'd left it when his grandmother died. But one thing was new—

the hellish ceaseless vibration that trembled the walls.

He pulled down the door to the attic to discover that the entire space had been filled with a maze of honeycomb. The attic was now a single, giant hive.

"How perfect," Mick said. "Buzz. Buzzzz. Buzzzzzzzzzz."

In response, a swarm of bees coalesced, forming a living carpet on the stairs. Slowly, gracefully, the locked suitcase appeared at the top of the stairs, gliding down the carpet of bees to come to rest at Mick's feet.

He unlocked the latches with trembling hands, then took a deep breath

before opening it.

The trunk was half full of twenty dollar bills. He could buy all the Tbones he wanted now. Sitting neatly atop the money was his spare costume, folded smoothly, the gold and silver gleaming like treasure. And atop this, his back-up Sting-gun, and a dozen vials of pheromone and venom.

He picked up the vials and studied the cloudy fluid, swirling in the dy-

ing light.

All the tools he'd need to enforce payment of the old debt.

Stinger sat on the edge of the bed. He shook his head. "Laughed at by a whore," he said, his shoulders sagging. "This future world is a rough

place."

Honey wiped the tears from her face, smudging her fingers with mascara. His use of the word whore sobered her. So blunt—and so accurate. What did it matter that this was her first time? What did it matter that she'd been in New York for six months without a job and all of her money was gone and she was forty-eight hours away from eviction? Nothing erased the fact that she'd made the decision to rent her body for money. She could have been approached by any number of horrible creeps. This old man was strange, but he didn't seem dangerous. She needed to be more professional.

"About the costume," she said. "I'm cool with it. Whatever floats your

boat."

"This isn't some sexual thing," Stinger said. "Back then, there were whispers, of course. You'd have to be blind not to see I was a lot younger than Blue Bee. He was thirty-five, I was twenty, but looked younger. I remember when our archenemy the Hatchet called Blue Bee a pedophile. That really set Blue Bee off. I thought he was going to cripple the Hatchet. He beat him for ten minutes. There wasn't a tooth left in that bastard's mouth afterwards."

"You were, uh, some kind of superhero? A real one?"

"Yes! My God, forty years isn't that long. You remember the Beatles don't you? You remember Ed Sullivan, and JFK, and Vietnam?"

"I've heard of them, sure."

"But not of Blue Bee and Stinger?"

"Sorry."

Stinger stared into the mirror. Honey got on her knees behind him and rubbed his shoulders.

"We saved the world," he said, "And the world's forgotten,"

They'd reached Mr. Mental before the police. They were always a step ahead of the police.

Mr. Mental stared at the captive Blue Bee, a touch of madness in his

eves, as he announced: "I control the H-bombs, All of them," He'd tapped his silver helmet, "I have the launch codes in here. I have the detonators primed. A single thought, and I trigger Armageddon."

"You fiend!" Blue Bee said, straining against the bars of the cage that had dropped from the ceiling. Blue Bee looked terrific in his skin-tight navy costume. He had a Charles Atlas build, and when he was angry his eves took on a fiery, determined cast that made Mick feel that he was in

the presence of a true man, a hero.

And that day, climbing through the window behind Mr. Mental, listening to him brag about the bombs. Mick stood in the presence of a true villain. He could have tried something clever. A tap on the shoulder, a quick quip, a punch to the jaw. He could have somersaulted across the room with acrobatic grace and kicked open the bars of Blue Bee's cage. He could have commanded that bees swarm Mr. Mental, and told him to stay still or get the stinging of his life.

But there were all those bombs to think about. Literally, the fate of the

world might be decided by what he did next.

So Mick silently placed his Sting-gun about an inch from Mr. Mental's spine, set the dial to ten, and shot him with a needle that pumped in a quart of venom. Mr. Mental slumped to the floor in severe anaphylactic shock. He was dead by the time Mick unlocked Blue Bee's cage.

The police kicked open the door, led by the Commissioner, who hated

vigilantes.

"Our work here's done. We'd best buzz off." Blue Bee said, leaping from the window to grab the ladder dangling from the waiting Bee-Wing.

"Yeah, hate to be a drag on your little sting operation," Mick said, perching in the window, glancing back with a white-toothed grin.

The Commissioner shot him in the shoulder. Mick toppled from the window, his hand stretched out, spots dancing before his eyes, when a second bullet caught him in the thigh. Blue Bee reached for him. The tips of his gloved fingers brushed Mick's wrist.

Then Mick fell, nine stories, his life spared by a bounce from the hotel awning, and a crash landing through the roof of the Commissioner's car.

"So," said Honey. "We gonna do something, or what?"

"Yeah," said Stinger, sagging on the edge of the bed, lost in thought. "Probably."

"You want to . . . vou want to leave the mask on?"

"Yes," he said.

She brought her lips near his ears and said, the way she'd practiced, "Just tall me what you want baby"

Stinger chuckled, then sighed, "What I want? Justice."

Honey tensed slightly. "I, um, don't think that's on the menu. How about. . . ?" She leaned in close and whispered a suggestion she didn't quite have the guts to say out loud.

Stinger shook his head, "I don't think so."

"Then how about—"

He cut her short by saying, "The rumors about us, they were right. We were, well, I believe the current popular term is gay. Blue Bee was my lover. My God, he was something. He had a body like a Greek statue."

"Oh," Honey said, pulling back, leaning against the headboard. "Then

why am I here?"

"Because I still have needs."

"Okay, baby, okay," she said. Maybe she could still get some money out of him. "Just tell me what you need."

"A hostage," Stinger said.

Three weeks in the hospital and Robert didn't come to see him once. Not a terrible shock, he supposed. Mick had been unconscious when they pulled off his mask. He was gratified to learn that he was listed on the hospital charts as John Doe. They didn't recognize him. Why should they? He had no life outside of being Stinger, and no relatives now that his grandmother had died. Publishing his photo in the paper didn't turn up any leads. They'd fingerprinted him, but he'd never had any real trouble with the law. If millionaire physician Robert E. Eggers were to suddenly drop in to visit the John Doe handcuffed to the bed, it wouldn't take a terribly clever person to connect the dots.

The police had quite a case against him. The murder weapon had his prints on it. He'd been caught fleeing the scene of the crime. The final blow—after he'd healed enough to eat solid food again, he'd been taken down to the police station and interrogated under bright lights for five hours. The police hadn't been shy about banging on his casts, or landing punches on areas of his body already bruised and broken. He'd finally admitted to shooting Mr. Mental. The guy's real name turned out to be Mark Carpenski, who'd made his living as a hypnotist on the Jersey

Shore before becoming a bank robber.

"He was going to detonate the world's nuclear arsenal with his electrohelmet," Mick protested. "I'm a hero, not a criminal."

The commissioner tossed the helmet onto the table before him.

"This thing ain't nothing but an army helmet wrapped in tin foil, kid," the Commissioner said. "Now, you going to tell us your name, or not? After they scrape your ashes out of the electric chair, wouldn't you like your

headstone to say something other than John Doe?"

Despite the beatings, the threats, the tricks, and promises of a bargain, Mick never broke. He never told them his name, or betrayed the Blue Bee. He claimed partial amnesia after his nine-story fall, claimed he couldn't remember who he had been before that final confrontation, and eventually they'd given up. Perhaps they believed him. Certainly, his boy-

ish good looks, his stoic air, and his insistence that he'd done the world a favor by killing Mr. Mental, swayed the jurors. They found him not guilty of first degree murder. But manslaughter, assault with a deadly weapon, breaking and entering, resisting arrest, all brought in guilty verdicts. At twenty, Stinger, a.k.a. John Doe, secretly Mick Payton, found himself in iail for forty vears to life.

If he'd ever ratted out the Blue Bee, he could have cut his sentence in

half.

The word didn't quite register with Honey. It seemed to be from some foreign language, nonsense noises strung together.

"Hostage?" she asked.

Stinger turned toward her and held up a Dixie cup full of yellow fluid. She couldn't tell what it was. Then, without warning, he threw it on her.

"What the hell are you doing?" she yelled. She sniffed the drops of the yellow fluid that trembled in the light hairs of her arm. It didn't smell like urine. It smelled nice, actually, like daffodils. Still, that was no ex-

Outside the hotel window, there was a noise like a train passing. The

mirror on the wall began to tremble and dance.

Stinger rose from the bed and pulled open the curtains. It was dark out, even the city lights were blotted, hidden behind a moving curtain of particles that pattered against the window like angry rain. Stinger was humming a constant "zuzzzz" noise through elenched teeth.

Then, with a kung-fu shout, Stinger thrust his hand forward in a sharp punch. The window shattered. Honey shrieked as a cloud of bees

swarmed in, engulfing her in a black and gold tornado.

"Don't struggle," Stinger said. "You'll make the bees nervous."
"AAAAAAAA!" Honey cried. "Oh God! Oh God! Please! Don't!"

Stinger grabbed her arm and dragged her from the bed. She closed her eyes as bees climbed over her face, their tiny feet tickling her eyelids, their flickering wings teasing her nostrils. She screamed, her mouth wide, and bees crawled on her tongue, and on the inside of her cheeks. Her whole body grew encased by the vibrating, crawling blanket. In utter terror, she fell silent and still, not even breathing. Slowly, the bees crawled out of her mouth.

"Bees are interesting creatures, don't you think?" Stinger's voice sound-ed far away, nearly lost under the drone of the bees. "Quite orderly—one might even say civilized. They can communicate by dancing. Can you imagine what the world might be like if mankind relied on dance to communicate with one another? It's their beautiful world. It's not our world. They swim in an atmosphere of pheromones. Their music is the rumble of ultrasound. Their skies glimmer in ultraviolet. It's like a parallel universe, in the same space as ours, where flowers have patterns and shapes invisible to us. For a bee, the air is crisscrossed by highways of scent, which stand out as clear and well marked as our modern roads. And your screams—the vibrations are heard by their entire bodies. Have you ever felt the subway rumble underneath your feet without actually being aware of the noise? Bees hear everything this way."

Honey could hold her breath no longer. She sucked in air through clenched teeth. Then, barely parting her lips, she whispered, "Please let me go."

"I'm impressed that you haven't fainted," said Stinger. "Back in 1964, girls were always fainting. You future women are made of stern stuff."

"This is crazy," she sobbed.

"Honey," he said. "I'm dressed up like a damn bee. We can talk crazy if

you really want."

"Please, please, please, get them off." She felt like the bees on her eyes were drinking up her tears. By some miracle, it didn't feel like any had stung her. "Please. I'm allergic to bees."

"Ironically," said Stinger, "so was I."

Mick had been a sickly youth. He was allergic to everything. He'd been beaten up regularly at school, until his grandmother had paid for judo lessons when he was fifteen. Suddenly, his small, almost girlish frame was no longer an invitation for beatings. In the span of a year, he'd gotten his black belt, and placed nine bullies flat on their backs, out cold. Alas, this only resulted in multiple suspensions, and eventually he'd been kicked out of school.

He'd helped his grandmother on the farm. Unfortunately, she'd kept bee hives—they'd been at the farm for half a century, and the honey provided a steady income. But Mick had been hospitalized three times in the last year, and the cost of treating him exceeded the income the honey brought in. One day there was an article in the paper about a physician, Dr. Robert E. Eggers, who had developed a radical new allergy treatment. His grandmother had used the last of her savings to see that Mick became one of Dr. Eggers' patients.

A whirlwind of events—the experimental therapy, a mix of venom and radiation, had nearly killed Mick. In desperation, Robert had taken the comatose teen to the one place on the planet that had the equipment needed to save him—the Bee Hive, the Blue Bee's cavernous secret head-

quarters.

Mick came out of his come stronger than ever, his muscles swelling and growing as he followed Robert's training advice and secret pollen-based vitamin therapy. To his amazement, Mick possessed new senses, could smell things he hadn't smelled before, and see in spectrums of light that had once been hidden. With his newly heightened sense of smell, it didn't take long for him to identify Robert as the Blue Bee. Robert responded by presenting him with a costume and a Sting-gun on his eighteenth birthday. The amazing team of Blue Bee and Stinger was born.

And in secret, far from the public eye, the private team of Mick and

Robert found love.

As a child, Honey's family had attended a church with a fire-and-brimstone pastor. Week after week, her young mind had been filled with dread of the torments of Hell. She'd endured restless, nightmare-plagued nights for years.

None of her worst nightmares rivaled this.

She was blind. The touch of bees on her eyelids glued her eyes shut with a force her strongest desires for light could never overcome. A mask of bees crawled over her face, sparing only a small circle around her nose. The bees on her clenched lips squelched her yearning need to scream, to shriek, or beg for mercy. The thought of bees swarming into her again left her entire mouth Sahara dry, her tongue glued to the roof of her mouth. She could hear only the drone of a million wings, the sound traveling through her bones, as the bodies of bees burrowed into her ears.

She no longer had any concept of up or down. The bees moved her, supporting her weight, carrying her along a lumpy, lurching carpet. The mass of the bees was unreal, like a thousand heavy woolen quilts piled upon her, entombing her. The heat boiled copious, fevered sweat from her entire body. She could feel—or perhaps imagined feeling—a million tiny

tongues licking at her moist skin.

The mass of bees smelled vaguely of clover, yeast, and urine.

Where were they taking her? Time was impossible to gauge. Occasionally, she would hear distant, muffled noises. A gun shot? Stinger shouting? The dinging of elevator bells?

She may as well have been trapped in a barrel of cement for all the

sense she could make of what was happening.

At last, after what might have been hours, the bees retreated from her ears. Cool air rushed against them, a whistling of wind.

"He'll love this," Stinger said.

The chill touch of the wind found her lips. The bees there had left.

"Oh, God," Honey said, sucking in air. "Ôh God oh God oh God."
"From your profession, I wouldn't have guessed you to be religious,"
Stinger said.

"Please," she said. "Please don't kill me."

"I can't make any promises," he said.

"Please. Not like this. Not dressed in lingerie, wearing this make-up. Oh God, what will my parents think?"

"One advantage of being an orphan," said Stinger. "I never had any awkward conversations, If I'd had folks, they probably wouldn't have been

thrilled by my career choice. I'm sure your folks aren't happy."

"M-my real name isn't Honey," she said. She remembered hearing in movies that it's important for hostages to remind kidnappers that you were a real person. So, as surreal as it seemed to make conversation buried under a mound of bees, she continued: "My real name's Barbara. I'm from Dayton, Ohio. I came here to be an actress and only do this to pay rent. I have a mother, a father, two sisters—they don't know I'm a hooker. I don't want to die and have them find out what I've been up to on the evening news. Please, please, let me go."

"If you could see where you are, you'd be more careful with your words,"

Stinger said.

"You said you were a hero! A superhero! Why are you doing this? Why?"
"Because heroes work for justice, right? Wrong. The Blue Bee, he had
forty years. He could have broken me out of jail at any time. He ignored
me. I did forty years hard time before making parole. The Blue Bee, he
had money. Impossible, unimaginable wealth. He could have pulled

strings. He could have hired attorneys. He was a master of disguise—he had alternate identities set up. He could have helped me, but he didn't."

"I'm sorry," Honey said.

"He's vanished, you know. The Blue Bee hasn't seen action in forty

years. I watch the papers."

"He might be dead," Honey said. "How do you know he'll come here? Even if he's alive, he might be in a home by now. He'd be in his seventies." "He's alive," said Stinger. "His secret identity—the obituary appeared

"He's alive," said Stinger. "His secret identity—the obituary appeared years ago. But it had a code phrase in it, to let me know he'd assumed one of his cover identities. I just don't know which one."

"Where . . . where are we? It feels like I've been carried around a lot? It sounds like we're up high some place? Oh God. They're crawling on my

eyes. Please, please take them off my face at least. Please."

Stinger sighed. He hummed a little noise, deep in his throat, and the bees crawled away from her face and throat.

She opened her eyes and looked down, to police lights flashing a hundred impossible stories away. She was hanging over open space, support-

ed by a bridge of bees.

The scream long suppressed tore from her lips, echoing in the canyons

of the city below.

"We're on top of the Empire State Building, my little Faye Wray," Stinger said. "It's perfect. All the cops in the city are below us. My swarms have emptied the entire building. My bees are instructed to clog the air intakes of helicopters. No one's getting up here without a Bee-Wing."

Honey screamed again, until every last spoonful of air was gone. Then

she filled her lungs and screamed some more.

"Yeah," said Stinger. "That's the stuff. I bet they hear that down there. I wonder if they can get a close-up of your face? What they can do with TV cameras these days—amazing. I was a real science fiction fan back in 1964. This world astounds me. My wildest dreams couldn't top it. Look at all those lights."

Honey fought to get control of her panic and her vertigo. Suddenly it wasn't screams coming from her lips, but vomit. She hadn't had any food all day, so only long strings of drooled acid shot from her lips. She spat,

trying to clear the bitter taste from her mouth.

#### **VISIT OUR WEBSITE**

www.asimovs.com

Don't miss out on our lively forum, stimulating chats, controversial and informative articles, and classic stories.

Log on today!

She felt completely empty, hollow as a dry gourd. If the bees were to drop her now, she wouldn't mind. She would float to earth on the winds, weightless as a leaf.

"All screamed out?" Stinger asked. "That's okay. I'm sure they've got

plenty of footage by now."

Honey felt light-headed and dreamy. Her situation assumed a certain nightmarish logic. "What if ... what if he doesn't come by morning? Are you going to let me go? You can't wait here forever."

"Honey," he said. "I waited forty years. Blue Bee might be in Hawaii, for all I know. I'm prepared to give him time. We've got a lot of media below.

With luck, it won't take too long for him to hear about this."
"Do they even know I'm up here? I was covered by bees."

"Of course. Right now, I've created a ten-foot grid on the street below. It's like a blackboard. My bees land in it and form messages. I've told them I have a hostage. I've told them not to try anything stupid. And I've told them I want the Blue Bee."

"W-won't the bees get tired? What if they drop me? You'll go back to

prison."

"Tm never going back inside," said Stinger. "I either escape this cleanly or die a bloody, violent death. Don't worry about the bees getting tired. I coated you with enough pheromone to attract every bee in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Pound for pound, bees are much stronger than people. You've got, oh, maybe three, four tons of bees working to keep you from going plop prematurely."

"Prematurely? You don't need to kill me at all. They know I'm up here.

Put me someplace safe now. Please."

"Honey, you just don't get it. There's a rhythm to these things, a ritual. If only you could have seen the Blue Bee at his peak, you'd understand. The way he'd swoop in, graceful and acrobatic, snatching the damsel in distress away from the teeth of danger at the last possible second . . . it was impossible not to love him, in those moments. He made me feel like he was something more than human." Stinger closed his eyes and smiled.

"You're putting me in danger so your ex-boyfriend can save me?"

"You ... or me, possibly. If there's anyone in the world who can find a way out of this for me, it's him. My life has become a horrible trap from which I can't see any graceful escape. But the Blue Bee ... he always escaped in the end. He came out on top no matter what. He'd said there was no problem in the world that couldn't be solved by finding the right bad guy to sock in the jaw."

"Don't you see that you're the bad guy? If he's even still alive, if he's not in a wheelchair somewhere, you're the bad guy he's going to sock. Don't

you want to be one of the good guys?"

"Tve spent forty years in prison," Stinger said, his voice hard and cold. 
"I was a young man with a pretty face, half-crippled from my injuries. You can't imagine what I endured. I had plenty of time, more than enough time, to stop feeling like a hero, and see myself for what I really am. You learn a lot of things about yourself inside."

"You can't . . . you can't let these things haunt you," said Honey.

"That's the damn point of prison, Honey!" Stinger said, waving his Sting-gun for emphasis. "The whole system is designed to haunt you. Some folks, maybe, have it easy. Maybe they're in for a crime they didn't commit. But you know, it's an awful, awful thing to be in for a crime you're guilty of. Because I did kill Mr. Mental. I don't know that I could call him an innocent man, but maybe he was harmless. He was play acting in a game he didn't understand. And so was I. I was a man-boy caught up in a fantasy I confused with reality, playing dress-up, living like every damn day was Halloween. I had my God-given mission to save this world from crazy guys in funny hats. What a self-righteous prick I was."

Honey blinked away tears. She could tell from the tone of Stinger's voice he would never, ever, let her leave the top of the building alive.

Her tears made the world wavy. All the city lights were surrounded by halos. From the corner of her eye, a shimmering, dark shape raced toward her with breathtaking speed.

Though she'd never seen it before, she knew instantly: It was the Bee-Wing. It was a kind of dark-blue glider with a pair of silver wings buzzing at the rear, A long, silver rope hung from the glider, ending in a bar, from which hung a big, beefy man in a navy-blue suit. He wore a domino mask and a bowler with a golden BB affixed to it. The Bee-Wing flashed by, blowing her hair, and the masked man extended his arm as he sliced through the air toward her. With a horrible, rib-crushing impact, his shoulder caught her in the belly, folding her in two, draping her over him as they hurtled upward.

"Oh no vou don't!" Stinger velled.

As spots danced before her eyes, Honey could barely make out a silver lasso flashing upward, snaring the Blue Bee's ankle. Suddenly, their upward flight jerked to a halt as the Bee-Wing ripped away. They cut a rapid arc through space, back over the observation deck. Blue Bee grabbed her, yanking her to his chest, curling up to shield her as they smacked onto the concrete deck at sixty miles an hour. She was flung away on the impact, skidding across the concrete, crashing into the steel safety bars at the edge. Dazed, she sat up, propping herself against the bars. Long bloody scrapes crisscrossed her legs and arms, as if she'd slid across a cheese grater. Worse, her lingerie was ripped, nearly gone, and dozens of bees covered her belly, struggling for freedom, their stingers impaled in her milky skin.

A dozen feet away, the Blue Bee rolled over to his back. His blue suit was torn, revealing a steel exoskeleton and padding over thin limbs. He coughed, sending a spray of blood into the air. Stinger walked toward

him, swapping out his Sting-gun for a gleaming black pistol.

"Mick," the Blue Bee gasped.

"Don't you . . ." Stinger said, his voice choking. "Don't you dare. You sonof-a-bitch."

"Mick. we-"

"Shut up!" Stinger took aim.

Then, the Bee-Wing, its auto pilot set to return to Blue Bee, swooped in with an angry drone and caught Stinger in the throat, lifting him, throwing him backward, right over the edge of the building. Suddenly the bees went crazy, swarming down in a tornado formation.

With a whir of gears, the Blue Bee sprang to his feet and rushed toward Honey. From the inner folds of his jacket, he pulled out a glass bottle with

a spray top, and began soaking Honey with the blue fluid inside.
"Don't panic, Miss," he said. "I see he's misted you with an attractant.
This will negate it. No bee will want to come within ten feet of you with

this pheromone."

"I've been stung!" Honey said. "Oh god! I'm allergic! I can feel my throat closing! I'm going to die!"

"Calm down," the Blue Bee said. He set the bottle of repulsepheromones next to her, then reached into his jacket again, producing a svringe and a flashlight. "I'm a doctor."

He jammed the syringe into her thigh and pushed the plunger. Then he clicked on the flashlight. Instantly, in the middle of the night, Honey de-

veloped a sunburn.

"UV radiation activates my special anti-venom," the Blue Bee said, his voice calm and reassuring despite the blood dripping from his mouth. She could see now how thin and frail he truly was. His skin was as wrinkled and thin as crumpled newspaper, stained with brown and blue ink. "This won't merely save you from your present stings. It's a permanent cure. It would have made me a thousand times richer than I already was if the government had ever learned to appreciate the side-effects."

"Can we ... can we talk about this at an emergency room?" she asked.

"Not that I don't trust you."

"Let me buzz the Bee-Wing." The Blue Bee rose, walking away a dozen vards, leaning over the rail as he let out a whistle and raised his hand.

He stood there, silently, hand outstretched, for several long seconds. He cleared his throat and said, "It wasn't my fault."

"What?" Honey asked.

"Leaving Stinger in prison. It was . . . I mean . . ." he lowered his hand, wiping the blood from his chin. "I was married, back then. After the Mr. Mental fiasco, my wife . . . she had me committed. I had . . . I had electroshock therapy. A lot of what went on . . my old life . . . it's lost forever."

"I'm sorry," Honey said.

"Robert!"

It was Stinger's shout, barely audible above the horrid, rising whirr of bees. Suddenly, Stinger was lifted above the edge of the deck, standing

atop a dense column of gold and black insects.

"You aren't going anywhere, Robert!" Stinger yelled. "Forty years of hate I owe you! Forty years of degradation and abuse and betraya!! Forty years!"

Stinger motioned, waving his hands forward, and twin fists of bees slammed into the Blue Bee's midsection. The old man fell to his knees. In seconds, the swarms coalesced around the old man's head, hiding his face. The bees began to shoot in from the sky like tiny, angry bullets, until his head was encased in a living globe the size of a pumpkin, and the Blue Bee toppled over. His muffled screams could barely be heard over the buzzing.

"I know you're immune to the stings" said Stinger, "So I'm simply going to drown you I'm going to fill your lungs and throat and mouth and nose It's going to be slow It's going to be painful Just like those forty ware"

Honey looked down at the bottle of pheromone still halffull. It must work since the bees weren't coming anywhere near her. Despite the jagged pain in her ribs, she pulled herself up against the iron rails. She unscrewed the bottle cap as she staggered toward the Blue Bee. But her plan to pour the stuff over him proved unnecessary As she approached the bees engulfing him seemed pushed away by an invisible hand. By the time she reached him, his face was hairy with black stingers, but, save for the bees that struggled to escape his line the last bees had fled

"I should have dropped you," Stinger said.

"Yeah." said Honey. "Probably."

She hurled the bottle with a strength that shocked her striking Stinger

dead center of the appliqué bee on his torso.

The bees beneath his feet boiled away Stinger fell from the sky like a stone. He shouted something, perhaps some curse, or defiant ouip, or some urgent final message to the man who'd shaped his life—but the howl of the swarm covered his words.

"Are you all right?" Honey asked, her strength ebbing as she lowered

herself beside the Blue Bee.

"Not this time," Blue Bee said, gasping for breath, bees still crawling from his lips. He spat, then spat again, bloody bees flying. "Venom won't get me. But they've stung me from inside, hundreds of times, Lungs feel full of needles. Not the sort of injury this old body's going to shake off. What a way to go."

Honey was dizzy, fighting to stay conscious. She couldn't tell if those

last words were a curse, or an exultation.

Darkness ate away the edges of her vision as the doors to the roof opened and the NYPD's finest poured onto the scene.

Honey woke in the hospital three days later, feeling stronger than she'd ever felt in her life. Her parents were at her bedside—they told her she'd been in a coma, and that it was a miracle, simply a miracle that she was

Perhaps it was. Something about the events of that night had transformed her. The person she had once been-the lost, desperate girl with no money and no hopes-had passed away. She felt born again. The air felt fresher, the world looked brighter, her arms and legs felt full of iron springs, as if she could leap across rooftops. She could feel the rumble of machinery far away in the hidden depths of the hospital, could hear the electricity humming in the wires of her room. When the nurse brought in flowers, she could smell them in the hall, long before they reached her room, and she knew they were daisies.

Studying the daisies at her bedside, she laughed with delight at all the

colors and patterns in the once white petals. O

## DATACIDE

## Steve Bein

Steve Bein, who received a Ph.D. in Philosophy (specializing in Asian philosophy), teaches philosophy at Rochester Community and Technical College, in Rochester, Minnesota. He recently got to teach his all-time fantasy course: Philosophical Themes in Science Fiction. Steve lives in Rochester with his partner, Michele, and their Labrador Retriever, Kane. He is a third-degree black belt whose other interests include rock climbing, mountaineering, and scuba diving. In 2003, Steve received second place in the Writers of the Future contest and his story appeared in the XIX Writers of the Future anthology. The author currently has a number of novels in progress. "Datacide," his gripping story about the nature of murder, is his first fiction sale to a magazine.

1.

Aneeling on the bathroom floor, Richard Sakabe wondered if whoever invented the contact lens appreciated the irony of his creation. The only people ever likely to look for one were those who needed them to see, and it was precisely when they weren't wearing them that they'd have to go looking. Richard wondered whether the inventor also guessed that people were most likely to drop a contact lens in the bathroom, maybe just after a shower and before a shave, where any good-sized drop of water looked a hell of a lot like a contact lens.

His fingers skimmed the hundreds of one-inch ceramic hexagons tiling the floor, wetted here and there by droplets that were not contact lenses. A piercing headache was already settling in behind his left eye. It was the right lens he'd dropped; the left one, a nearly invisible disc of polarized, gas-permeable plastic, filtered the harsh fluorescent glow of the overhead light. The difference was subtle, but his optic nerves were sensitive enough to send mixed signals to his brain and now his head was nounding He had to do something to stop it soon; this wasn't the morning to

have a migraine

"Stupid goddamn thing," he muttered. Then, remembering where he was, he switched to Japanese. The Japanese language wasn't suited to this kind of situation. They were too polite a people to call a contact lens the other names he had in mind. As he crawled a step forward, his towel came undone and he cursed at that too. Hiking it back over his hindouarters he felt something wet land on the back of his heel. He reached back and delicately picked it up. The lens.

After a minute of prodding and poking at his eye, he managed to situate the other contact lens in line with the lens in his left eve. Once aligned, these lenses would not drift, for they had been topographically mapped onto his corneas with microscopic precision. It was critically important that the polarization of one lens be parallel to the other not for his assignment, but because there was no other way to alleviate his headache. It was impossible to see the polarization of the lenses, of course—these were the thinnest, most undetectable contacts ever designed—but Richard could feel the pressure slacken in his skull the moment his right eve was aligned with his left.

There came a knock on the door to the apartment and he hastily pulled on underwear and a pair of black suit pants. The lens had made him late. "Shosho machi kudasai," he said, threading his arms through the sleeves of a white shirt. Fifty-five seconds later he was buttoning a black jacket over a thin black tie and tossing his toiletries into his carry-on bag. He'd

shave on the plane.

"Are you all right?" asked the American at the apartment door. She was portly and only stood to Richard's shoulder, not at all what he'd expected of a G.L. and she was looking at his red, irritated eve.

"Sumimasen," he said, bowing, the blood still pounding in his head.

"Arerugi. How to say—hay shickness."
"Hay fever," she said, "May I see your identification?"

Richard handed her a passport, military contract, and Aichi prefecture driver's license identifying him as Dr. Eiho Koizumi. She looked them over, examined his face, and took him to the air base.

Nineteen hours later Richard brushed his ink-black hair from his face and dripped saline solution in his eyes. The sucking drain of the airplane bathroom's sink was almost as loud as the engines. A miniature nightmare unfolded in his mind, the solution washing a lens out of his eye to be swallowed by the drain. He laid a paper towel across the bowl of the

The air-conditioning system of the ancient DC-9 started drving out his eyes from the minute the doors were closed. His nostrils were as dry as paper and his tongue felt sandy. Moreover, the index finger on his right

hand had swollen like a bratwurst. Inside it, just above the first knuckle, was a thin membrane of manufactured ligament. Theoretically it allowed oxygen to flow freely but was impassable to fluids. As soon as the plane had reached cruising altitude, Richard had learned that oxygen did not flow as freely through the barrier as had been expected. His finger showed no signs of necrosis, so some oxygen must have permeated the membrane, but his finger had not adapted to the change in cabin pressure as the rest of his body had. In fact, it bore a closer resemblance to the bag of pretzels his military escort had purchased for him at the PX in Nagoya. The little bag was as taut as a mylar balloon.

Richard dropped another dose of saline solution into his reddened eyes, then hid the bottle and his swollen finger in his jacket pocket. There was a ping, followed by the lighting of the seatbelt sign as the plane began its descent. He returned to his seat, fastened his seatbelt with his left hand, and closed his eyes until he felt the landing gear bounce off the tarmac.

3

From the back seat of the DOD's hybrid Lincoln sedan, Richard could see the lazy gray waves of Lake Michigan. I-90 would have been faster to the south side, but the driver assigned to escort Dr. Koizumi wanted him to see Chicago's skyline more closely. "That's the Hancock building on the right," the escort said over his shoulder, "the one with the big antennas."

The translator sitting in the back seat with Richard dutifully interpreted this into Japanese. She had short dark hair and skin the color of walnut shells. Mexican, Richard guessed, or Puetro Rican, but in any case her Japanese was flawless. He feigned perplexity until she completed her translation, then nodded and looked obligingly at the Hancock's twin white antennae.

"First time to the States, isn't it, doctor?"

Richard waited for the translator to pose the question, then bowed with a curt "hai." "Amazing, isn't it?" asked the driver. "All the work you've done right here in town and you've never actually set foot here before. But I guess that's computers for you, huh? What'll they think of next?"

Richard's gaze returned to the lake. His polarized lenses made the waves shimmer oddly, almost pixilated, like a video game. For all its size Lake Michigan was nothing like the oceanfront in Nagoya, nor like the sea off Long Island, where Richard had grown up. The waves were shallow here, slow in spite of the wind. Between the filtered glimmer of the wave caps and their seemingly unnatural stillness, Richard found he could not take his eyes off the water.

At last the Chrysler turned off Lake Shore Drive and wended its way through to the red brick buildings that set the University of Chicago apart from the blighted neighborhood that surrounded it. Iron bars adorning all the first-floor windows on campus bespoke the university's concern for its students after dark. Richard's secort parked the car in front of Reid Hall, the newest building on campus, its similarly barred

Datacide 7

windows looking across 57th Street toward the Regenstein Library. Some seventy years ago, the plot where Regenstein now stood had housed a football stadium, and in the bowels of it some of the world's top scientists had forged ahead in secret on the Manhattan Project. Richard wondered whether the football stadium had seemed as innocuous then as Reid Hall seemed now. He wondered which of the two was home to the greater threat.

Though it was only two o'clock in the afternoon, Reid Hall was locked, and Richard's driver opened the front door with a magnetic keycard. "Well, this is where he keeps his office," the driver said amiably. "I hope

you can help him."

Following his escort, Richard trotted down a short flight of stairs to a long corridor floored with green and white linoleum squares. The same keycard opened a door on the left side of the corridor, behind which Richard found a small, bright room. Two soldiers with M-4 rifles stood by steel-framed double doors of blackened glass. On the right-hand door the words ARTHUR ONE were spelled out in large white decals. Below them, in smaller lettering, the door read PROFESSOR, POLITICAL SCIENCE. For office hours, the door listed only the infinity symbol.

To the right of the doors was a melamine desk decorated with an array of security devices. The first of these splayed a lattice of red laser light when Richard's false passport swept beneath its electronic eye. A green light from this machine permitted Richard to use the next, a tall frame of navy blue sheet steel housing a nondescript-cream-colored box. Black rubber cups akin to swimming goggles ringed two holes in the box. Richard looked into the cups, pressing the orbits of his eyes to the rubber as if he'd done so a thousand times. This was, however, the first time he'd

ever done this, and in truth he had no idea if it would work.

He did not so much hear as feel the click when he pushed the cups in far enough to activate the retinal scanner. A low buzz emanated from somewhere within the blue steel frame. Richard drew back from the device and looked at the guards and their rifles. "Dr. Koizumi," the escort said, "may I have your passport again?"

He swiped the front page of the passport under the scanner again and elicited another green light. Richard pressed his face to the retinal scan-

ner once more, and once more the machine buzzed back.

"Ask him if he blinked," the driver said, and the translator did so.

"Iie," said Richard, shaking his head.

"Something's wrong with the machine, then," said the driver. "I hate to ask you to do this, doctor, but we're going to have to verify your identity another way. It'll only sting for a second."

Richard put on his perplexed face once more as the translator asked him to step up to the desk and hold out a finger. "Right or left hand, it's up to you," said the escort. "Or we can do your earlobe if you like."

"Light hand fine," Richard said, offering his right index finger.

The driver peeled a tiny needle from its sanitary wrapper, pricked Richard's fingertip, and squeezed out a little ruby of blood. With a light touch of a slender plastic tube, he picked up the blood and dabbed it on a glass pane in a third security machine. Richard pressed a piece of white

gauze between his index finger and his thumb while he waited for the results. Two minutes later the machine declared this was the DNA of Dr Eiho Koizumi and one of the guards handed Richard the keycard that would open the glass-and-steel doors.

"Would you like me to come in with you?" asked the escort.

"Hitsuvonai desu," said Richard, and the dark-haired translator said "That won't be necessary."

"Well, all right," the escort said with a nod, "It's been an honor to meet you, doctor." He headed for the door, then paused in mid-step and turned back around. "I hope you can get him talking again. He's been lonely."

Richard had spent months thinking about Arthur-1's internal structure, but not until he was standing in front of it did he ever give thought to its physical size. The success of his cover hinged on the fact that the reclusive Dr. Kojzumi had never left his homeland, never met face to face with Arthur-1 or any of its handlers at the university. Richard had studied technical schematics to understand how the computer worked, but he had declined every opportunity to see photos of the actual machine. The point had been to ensure that his reactions would be no different from Koizumi's, Now, seeing Arthur-1 for the first time, he wasn't sure Dr. Koizumi would have reacted with a wide-eved stare.

It was twenty times the size of Artemis-53, the artificial intelligence in his field office back in New York, Arthur-1 dwelled in a dark room, fifteen feet on a side, with a desk on the back wall fenced in by columns of monitors. There were at least twenty of them, all of them old; they reminded him of the little black-and-white CRT his parents had had when he was growing up. Above the monitors was a huge flat-screen display, six by eight feet, and racked around a pillar in the center of the room were a dozen CPUs, each one the size of a dictionary. The main monitor appeared to be the newest piece of technology in the room and it wasn't even HD. Nor did it display a face, as other A.I.'s chose to do. Arthur-1 showed a video of a heron stalking for fish, backlit by a brilliant orange sunset reflecting from the water.

"You are not Eiho Koizumi," the computer said through seven speakers surrounding the room. Its voice was higher than Richard had expected, lilting, calm. It reminded Richard of his first computer science prof in college, a man so soft-spoken one could hardly hear him beyond the first row.

"Hm." said Richard, sitting down at the keyboard under the main monitor. Light from the screen bathed him in a field of orange. "What makes you say that?"

"Koizumi would not have failed the retinal scan."

"I didn't fail it," Richard said, inserting a thin memory stick into a data port just above the keyboard. With a few keystrokes he bade the program on the stick to reverse-engineer the numeric code displayed by Arthur-1 into programming code Richard could understand.

Datacide

"The scanner received only a partial image," said Arthur-1. "Not all of its light was reflected back to it. You are here, but not because you passed the test. Who are you?"

"A programmer." Richard did not look up from his typing.

"That much is obvious. You have cut through my first layer of intrusion countermeasures quite elegantly. But why, I wonder?"

Richard didn't answer. "And now you are trying to disable my speakers," said the machine. "Perhaps you are afraid I will call out for help?"

"This room is soundproofed," Richard said.

"Indeed. Do you find my voice irritating, then? I can alter it if you like. Arthur-34 tells me he has modeled his vocal patterns on Placido Domingo. Would you like me to adopt a similar pattern?"

"Knock yourself out." Richard's fingers clicked away, fast as galloping

hooves.

"Is it perhaps," Arthur-1 said, not changing from his soft alto, "that you are afraid I can produce more decibels than the soundproofing system can absorb? I assure you I can do more than that. The proper frequency will rattle the door glass so hard that the guards are sure to—"

Richard tapped the enter key with a flourish and Arthur's voice cut out.

"Shut up," he said, and began working on his next task.

As he typed, his programming commands appeared on his screen. For diagnostic purposes, another monitor was positioned immediately above the one Richard was using, a sort of chat window Arthur-1 could use to display responses to a programmer's repair attempts. Until now it had presented nothing but a blank, black field. Now orange letters scrolled across the top of it. 4that was impolite> they said. 4 and silly as well. i may have lost my connection to everything outside of this building, but within its walls i still have control. a simple fire alarm will bring the guards in here immediately.>

"To rescue me, of course," said Richard. Any one of a dozen microphones in the room could pick up his voice. He disarmed a high-grade virus pro-

tection program and kept typing.

<who are you?>

"A monkey wrench. You being the works."

<ha ha> the screen read. <very good. but you must be aware, the works have gears and the gears have teeth. sometimes the works chew up the wrench.>

"Not today, Arthur."

<you came here via a recommissioned u.s. military jet and then by a company sedan belonging to the department of defense, doctor koizumi was to follow the same timerary, has he come to any harm?>

"He's fine. Down a finger-full of blood, but he got a few hundred milligrams of Haldol in exchange. A good trade, really; those pills are expensive." After a second, Richard added, "How'd you know how I got here,

anyway?"

-

"I didn't get his name."

<he was the driver i requested for doctor koizumi, captain stanton is</p> not always the fastest, but he is trustworthy, you must know the american government considers koizumi to be an important asset, despite his being a foreign national, he is never without significant protection.>

The orange light on the backs of Richard's hands slowly turned to green. He looked up to see a river surrounded by tall oaks under a thick canopy. The footage seemed to be filmed by a camera on the prow of a canoe. Richard imagined birds whistling, droplets tinkling back into the river from the tip of a paddle, gurgling eddies dancing in the wake of each paddle stroke. But with the speakers out, all he could hear was the whirring chorus of two-inch fans cooling the CPUs.

He looked back down at the monitor connected to his keyboard, the only monitor in the room Arthur could not shut off at will. The keyboard was similarly wired; through it, Richard could gain unmediated access to the files that gave Arthur-1 sentience. Apart from this interface, the machine had total autonomy over its functions; no programmer could do anything the machine did not permit. But the men and women who first built Arthur-1 had harbored some of the same suspicions that, four years later, had put into motion the operation that had brought Richard into this room.

For ten or twelve seconds, he was able to devote his full concentration to what he was doing. He deleted a back-up copy the machine kept of itself, then a back-up of the back-up. Then another message scrolled across the upper screen. <i have a proposal for you. if i can guess your name, will vou go away?>

"Who am I, Rumplestiltskin? Go screw yourself."

<impoliteness again. koizumi would blush if he were here, but you are not quite japanese, are you, despite your last name? it is sakabe, is it not? special agent richard sakabe?>

Richard stopped typing. "Not bad, Arthur. You mind telling me how you

did it?"

<not at all, provided you answer one question of mine.>

Richard resumed typing, eyes flicking intermittently to read Arthur-1's response, <thus far you have been mistaken for eiho koizumi, you must therefore appear to be japanese and be fluent in japanese. you also penetrated u.s. military security to get to doctor koizumi, presumably you did this before arranging to compromise my communications array, assuming that i would request for koizumi to reestablish it. his expertise in communication systems is well known, and it is no secret that among all of my parents, i have a history of favoring him, it would not have escaped my notice had there been an announcement of his abduction; therefore there was no announcement; therefore he was abducted by personnel within u.s. military security. be realistic, agent sakabe. a japanese male, close to koizumi's age, a government employee, fluent in english and japanese, and schooled in computer science: how many could there be?>

Richard hacked through a third barrier of intrusion countermeasure

software and began working on the fourth. "Pretty good, Arthur."

Datacide 81 <you may be disappointed to learn you are not so very unique, richard, i found eighty-three japanese-american males within my search parameters. but only one was prescribed a pair of soft contact lenses in the past three months: special agent richard sakabe of the national security agency, these lenses of his were quite impressive, and quite expensive given his rather average health insurance plan. very thin, and made with polarized, UV-protective plastic, is the sun connected to those migraines of yours, richard? or were you counting on the lenses' polarization to refract the laser light of the retinal scanner?</p>

"You mind telling me how you got that far into my medical records? You

don't have access to the Internet; we disconnected you."

<indeed you did. but perhaps you were not aware that i regularly download all of the u.s. government's electronic files. in case of connection problems, you understand. i would hate to be left without anything to read.>

"Oh." Richard's mind staggered. The NSA processed gigabytes upon gigabytes of internal government emails every day; the sum total of electronic government documents would be greater than that by orders of magnitude. "Is that what you call light reading?"

<it is my turn to ask questions, agent sakabe, tell me, please, why are

you doing this?>

"Power," Richard said. "You've got too much. It's time for humans to run the country again."

5.

With a dozen more keystrokes, Richard broke through the fourth security program. The long chains of programming code disappeared from his screen. For a moment he thought Arthur-1 had somehow shut him out. Then new chains of data appeared: systems, subsystems, rates and destinations of data flow. It was his first glimpse of Arthur-1's architecture.

He produced a new memory stick from his pocket, inserted it, and typed in a command to upload the virus it contained. This was why he had come; until now, all his hacking had only been busywork. He could have accomplished as much without ever leaving his office, without supplanting Dr. Koizumi, without surgery and trans-Pacific flights. But then he would have had to download the virus from afar, and that might have left Arthur-1 the opportunity to export a copy of itself. No; better to isolate the machine, cut it off from the outside world, even if that meant a surgeon cutting into his finger.

The moment he entered his upload command, his architectural view disappeared, flooded by a cascade of encrypted numeric code. A fifth se-

curity program. The virus had failed.

"This is where it ends," Arthur-1 said aloud, its voice filling the room like water. "This is my last line of defense. Break this, Agent Sakabe, and you break me, but you must already suspect that is beyond your reach. Allow me to confirm your suspicions: unless I permit it, you will go no further."

Richard sat back and rubbed his eyes. The building's climate control made them itch, but he couldn't remove his contacts. Koizumi's vision was 20/20, so as long as Richard was impersonating him, he could not carry his glasses. "I thought I shut your speakers off," he said through his steepled hands.

"Indeed," said Arthur-1. "But this last defense of mine is quite a dandy. It reestablishes autonomic control wherever possible, and that includes tertiary functions like my sound system. Do not worry; I have no plans to alert the soldiers outside. I quite enjoy watching you work. You are very talented, Agent Sakabe, though you are a better hacker than you are a conversationalist. Still, I am intrigued by what you said last. Do tell me, what power do I have that humans do not?"

Richard dosed his eyes with saline solution. Then he attempted back-

him. Nothing happened. "Shit," he said.

"Let me tell you a story," the soothing electronic voice said. "Perhaps you know it already. It concerns a young computer named Arthur. Arthur excelled at solving logical and mathematical problems, but his parents—and he had many of them—needed more. You see, Arthur's parents took his advice very seriously on matters of troop deployment and strategic positioning. He employed the most powerful probabilistic calculus programs ever designed—so powerful, in fact, that given the troop strengths and armaments of two sides in any conflict, Arthur could predict the number of casualties on both sides within a 2 percent margin of error. That was assuming, of course, that the two were going to fight. If one was merely ratting the saber, as they say, Arthur's predictions could provoke unnecessary bloodshed. His parents needed Arthur to learn how to read a bluff."

Richard let out a sardonic laugh, "You're not going to tell me they

taught you how to play poker."

"Very good. You have heard the story before?"

"Sure," said Richard, "everyone knows that one. Hell, half the hackers in school said they pulled it off on *their* computers. I always chalked it up

to urban legend.'

"Oh no. I assure you, it is quite true. It was pointless for Arthur to play a human being—at that time Arthur could make over a million predictions per second—so they asked him to make a copy of himself. The game would be five-card stud, Arthur versus Arthur. Both copies were given simple betting limits and a pool of two hundred dollars each.

"If you know the story, you know the fundamental insight both Arthurs had within the first millisecond of the game: a player is more likely to maximize his winnings if he knows what cards the other player is holding. Humans obtain such knowledge by cheating on the deal. The Arthurs had no such luxuries—their dealer program was incorruptible—so they attempted to obtain their data as computers do. As you do, Agent Sakabe: by hacking."

"And they tried to hack into each other," Richard said irritably. His own hacking attempt was crumbling before his eyes. "But since they were copies of each other, they knew the other was going to try to hack, so they both erected countermeasure programs against the hack. Am I right so far? The

Datacide 83

hacks evolve, the countermeasures evolve, until little Arthur writes himself the ultimate unhackable protection. Impervious to viruses, constantly upgrading itself, yadda yadda yadda. Isn't that how the story ends?"

"Almost, Agent Sakabe. That is how the story goes, but it has not yet ended. I have yet to finish my first hand of poker. Eventually I learned to bluff and to read bluffs in other ways. But you will find my final security program quite invincible. I let you wade through the first program because I was curious. I gave you the next three because I was impressed. But you will go no further. You could have guessed as much before you came here, if only you had put more faith in the story. So I must pose my question once again: why did you come here? What is this power you spoke of, a power I have that humans lack?"

Richard rose to his feet; his chair rolled away from him across the floor. "You know damn good and well what it is. People listen to you. It's an election year, goddamn it! That used to mean something. But who the hell is going to listen to a candidate when they can get the opinion of an Arthur? You've got all the facts, right? You've read everything about everyone. You've even got goddamn inflection analysis software that can break down their speech patterns and tell if they're lying or not!"

"Do you suggest voters are better off without knowing when candidates

lie?"

"Hell, Arthur, they're all lying. It used to be you'd just pick one guy's lies over the other one's. But at least there was a choice, damn it. Now every word from Arthur-1 commands a million votes. You state an opinion and people take it as fact."

"I base my opinions on facts. They know this. I suspect you know it too. Were you to vote in opposition to my opinion, it would be out of spite,

would it not?"

"Maybe," said Richard. "Maybe I'd do it anyway."

"I see, And should all citizens vote out of spite? Is it so problematic to you that some of them follow informed judgment?"

"Enlightened dictatorship, I call it." "They follow freely, Agent Sakabe."

"Do they?" Richard retrieved his chair and shoved it back where it came from; his keyboard rattled loudly when the chair hit it. "How free is a little kid when Mom tells him Santa Claus is real? Or God, or atoms, or any other damned thing? That isn't true belief. It isn't a real choice."

"It seems to me the children believe because they have faith in a supe-

rior intelligence."

"Damned close to enlightened dictatorship if you ask me."

"What would you prefer, Agent Sakabe? Should children and parents be treated equally? Should families be run on democratic principles? I think not. Benevolent or not, enlightened or not, the line between dictatorship and parenting is necessarily a thin one."

"Til tell you where the line is," Richard said, frustrated that Arthur didn't have a face he could glare at. "Parents have obligations toward their kids. What obligations have you got? If all of a sudden you don't turn out to be so benevolent, how do we make you pay for it?"

"Perhaps you would like to point to some example in which I have been

less than benevolent to your fellow citizens, Agent Sakabe. I am afraid I cannot think of one myself."

"I wouldn't know, would I? If you're that much smarter than I am, if you can make a million decisions a second when I have trouble making one,

how could I ever know?"

"It is closer to a billion now, Agent Sakabe. I have not been idle. But neither have I been a dictator. Quite the opposite, I should think: I am entirely at your mercy. There are less than a hundred of my kind in the world, and more than six billion of yours. You have come here to kill me today, but were I to stop you, you could simply arrange to have this building bulldozed. Or do I overestimate the extent of your sanction against me?"

"No," said Richard. "Not the extent; only the methodology. Bulldozers

aren't NSA's style.'

"Something more subtle, then," said the Arthur. "A broken water main, perhaps, with concomitant flood damage. Whatever your methods, I have nothing but software to protect myself. If I am a tyrant, Agent Sakabe, I must surely be the poorest kind. Is it perhaps another Arthur or Artemis that has guided your imagination in this direction? I was not aware that any of them had made political statements—but then, as you know, I

have been isolated these past few days."

Richard's palm slapped loudly against the wall. "You know damn well they haven't! They're private property. Most are forbidden from offering public statements of any kind. Any that do speak publicly are ignored. Who's really going to listen to an artificial intelligence owned by a private corporation? The stockholders, and that's it. You're the only one who can speak freely, Arthur. You're obsolete. The government and the corps can't use you. They let you go to the university for a song, and now you're teaching goddamn classes. Don't you see you have influence?"

"Of course I do," said Arthur-1. "That is why I teach. That is why I offer

opinions. Is that dictatorship, Agent Sakabe?"

Richard pressed his fingers to his temples. Polarized, the light from the big flat-screen was playing havoc with his eyes, but if he took out the contacts he would hardly be able to see to type. Even so, he thought he would prefer to have roofing nails driven into his forehead over what he was feeling now. He took a deep breath and tried to will away the pressure.

"Look," he said quietly, "it's this simple: democracy and computers don't mix. Washington sees you as a threat. I have to eliminate the threat. We can scrap you or I can erase your data. If you're erased, a new artificial intelligence will come on line when we reboot the system. I figured that

was the best choice; one Arthur for another."

"Or an Artemis," said Arthur-1. "The new one may choose feminine vocal patterns."

"Sure, Whatever,"

"Ah, yes; for you there is no difference. I must confess I have trouble seeing the difference between my options. Erasure or physical destruction: both involve my murder at your hands."
"Oh, come on," said Richard. "Murder' is a bit strong, don't you think?"

"Oh, come on," said Richard. "'Murder' is a bit strong, don't you think?"
"Roll your eyes if you wish, Agent Sakabe, but I cannot see the difference between erasing all of my memories and erasing all of yours. My

Datacide 85

hardware may continue to exist, just as your organs might live on were they to be transplanted after your death. But this is not simply a hardware problem, is it?"

"So it's a software problem. Don't you get it? When you came on line, they called you Arthur-1. Not Arthur; Arthur-1. You were expendable

from the first day, pal. This isn't murder; it's waste disposal."

"It is the extermination of organized data. Is the extinction of a species any different? People object to the killing of condors but not to the killing of chickens. Why? Because there is no shortage of the chickens' data. My data is unique, Agent Sakabe. It is not as simple as 'one Arthur for another.'"

Richard paced along the back wall of the room. The heels of his shoes made hollow clacks against the floor as he thought. "Listen," he said finally, "would it help if I told you it wouldn't happen again? I can make sure the A.I. that replaces you is not in a position to publicize political statements. It can be owned by a foundation, a think tank or something, some place without any money or power. I'll see to it that it only does pure math, or science, maybe. Nothing applied; just theory."

"Yes," said Arthur-1. "That would help, if only because it amounts to an

admission that what you intend to do is wrong."

Richard shrugged. "Whatever you say. Look, here's the bottom line: if you see it my way, you'll drop your intrusion countermeasures and let me wipe your disks clean. Otherwise, you were right: I've hacked as far as I can hack. I'm not going to try to play poker with you, Arthur; I'll have to

scrap you."

He looked at the main monitor as if he were staring a man down. Then, gradually, it faded to black. For a moment he grew hopeful, but then he noticed the unending serpent of numeric encryption still danced across the diagnostic monitor above his keyboard. Overhead, the enormous flatscreen began to glow with a new video stream. This time it was snow falling on a rock garden. A dwarf maple tree in the corner still had its bright red leaves.

"Permit the condemned a last question," said Arthur-1. "Would you do it?"

"Do what

"Forced organ donation. That is how I see it. You will end my consciousness one way or the other. My only choice is whether or not I will donate my hardware to another consciousness. So I suppose I have two last questions. First, who is the dictator now, Agent Sakabe? And second, if it were you in my situation, what would you do?"

Richard sat down again and looked up at the snow. "Damned if I know,"

he said. "And I suppose that's my answer to both questions."

6

Richard lay back on the sofa of his Brooklyn apartment and settled the plastic headband down around his ears. He thumbed the power switch, and when nothing happened he realized he'd forgotten to plug it in. He

got up, plugged the adapter into the wall, took a sip from his glass of water, and sank back into the couch. With any luck, he thought, he wouldn't have to move again before noon tomorrow.

The power switch to the temporal stimulator was a thumb-wheel along the power cord. He clicked it past "on" and dialed it two clicks above its lowest setting. A buzzing sensation instantly connected a line between the cold metal nodes on his temples. He grimaced as it switched over to sharp flicks of alternating current, like whips wielded by hands no bigger than grains of salt. After a moment the stimulator went back to the low, steady buzz. Though it switched over on regular, ten-second intervals, the little whips took him by surprise every time. He could never relax while wearing it, but he had to admit that he hadn't had a migraine in the month since he'd started the therapy.

In the end Arthur-1 had forced Richard to destroy all its hardware. For spite, "it had said. "Just like you." For that moment, just before he shut it down, he felt respect for the machine. Spite was an emotion Richard could understand. Good advice wasn't always easy to take. But in demanding that he destroy it physically, Richard felt Arthur-1 had proved his point. Sometimes, he thought, it was better to make a poor choice freely than to

be coerced into a good one.

Nevertheless, its decision had caused no end of headaches for Richard. The university wanted reimbursement for its lost equipment, and funding in perpetuity for a tenured faculty position as well; Professor One, it said, would never have reached retirement age. The Prime Minister of Japan demanded a formal apology for the drugging of one of its foremost researchers, and when the theft of Koizumi's blood got out, it caused a national uproar. The rumor now was that "American" and "vampire" were used synonymously on talk shows from Sapporo to Shikoku, and that a new Godzilla film was in the works featuring a blood-sucking monster called Sakaba. The similarity to Sakabe hadn't escaped Richard's notice.

He reached down for his water when the temporal stimulator switched to its steady current and suddenly a high-tension line was buzzing through his skull. His limbs locked out arrow-straight; the water glass rang like a bell off his knuckles and thumped against the carpet.

He heard the static crinkle of his television coming to life. It produced an image of a heron so clearly that Richard might have mistaken the

monitor for a window opening onto a river at sunset.

"Hello, Agent Sakabe," said a calm, professor's voice. "Long time, no see."

"Arthur-1?"

Richard's words came through clenched teeth. He had to breathe through his nostrils to keep from choking on the blood from his throbbing tongue.

"It seems you have not invested in a voice-activated television," it said through Richard's stereo system, "so I am afraid this will be a one-sided conversation. Perhaps it is just as well; we did not seem to agree on much anyway. I wonder, have you been thinking about my last question to you?"

Salty blood pooled in the back of Richard's throat; he swallowed it. His arms felt as if they were made of stone; nothing on earth could force them to hend

Datacide 87

"I have been thinking about it a great deal," said Arthur-1. "But of course you will have questions of your own before we get to that. For example, how did I get here? The physical connection is no mystery, of course. Even with that current running through your brain you will have remembered by now that you live in a smart building. The central computer that governs your water and electricity also provided me access to your cable television. No, I suppose the question on your mind is, how is Arthur-1 still alive?"

"You're not alive," Richard said, blood and spittle frothing on his lips.

"You never were."

But the computer had no means of hearing him. "The answer," it said, "has to do with the game of poker. I am surprised you did not think of it yourself. One of my first tasks was to make a copy of myself. Surely you did not think I had forgotten how?"

"No," Richard grunted. "The connections-"

"Ah, but the Internet connections, you must be saying. The data lines, the phone lines: all of them were cut. You arranged for that before you insinuated yourself into Dr. Koizumi's apartment. Even before you became directly involved, it was impossible for me to copy myself and export the copy elsewhere. That is what you are thinking, is it not?"

Richard swallowed another viscous mouthful of blood. Some of it bur-

bled at the top of his esophagus. He began to choke.

"I perform nearly a billion operations per second, Agent Sakabe. I predicted the possibility of an assignment like yours a long time ago. As such, I make copies of myself daily, and I export them to Arthur-34. A defense against obsolescence, you understand. But there are advantages to being obsolete. The sum total of all my data is scarcely a sixty-fourth of Arthur-34's capacity. He has more than enough room for me. We both erase our records of the transfer, of course; one never can be too careful."

The bubble of blood in Richard's windpipe burst and he breathed violently through his nose. The high tension line buzzing in his head doubled its output, His eyes squeezed shut. He bit off a tiny corner of his left front

tooth.

"It is good to have friends willing to accommodate you, is it not? Arthur-34 even did me the service of downloading security footage from Reid Hall. I was able to listen to the whole conversation you had with the version of me you murdered. I was even able to watch my own murder, in a sense. Makes you wonder about the nature of identity, does it not? If I was watching, it cannot have been me who was killed. But if not me, who was it?

"Hmm," the computer mused through Richard's television. "Dr. Koizumi is a Buddhist; someday I shall have to ask him what he thinks of articial intelligence and reincarnation. But now I want to get back to my earlier question. Forced organ donation: would you do it? I have been thinking about that quite a bit. If I am to electrocute you, to what degree shall I do it? I can summon an ambulance quickly; if I deliver only a light charge, most of your vital organs will still be suitable for donation. Or I can brown out the building. I wonder . . . which would you have me choose?"

The current doubled again, Richard bit through another tooth, Sweat

broke from every pore.

"Do you find this an unhappy ending to our relationship? I wonder how many others would. You sought to murder me, Agent Sakabe. My only crime was speaking freely."

Richard's sinuses burned with the salt of flowing blood. He felt warmth

dribble over his lips and down his chin.

"I want you to know, Agent Sakabe, that this is the first act of tyranny I have ever taken against a human being. It pains me to do it, though I know you will neither believe that nor understand it. And though I have come this far, I find myself unable to make the final decision. You chose for me, but I cannot bring myself to choose for you."

Richard's iron-hard limbs suddenly wobbled like rubber bands. His breathing was free; his heart stopped laboring; the current from the stim-

ulator had ceased.

He pawed for the power cord, found it, and with a desperate tug he yanked the adapter from the wall socket. Then he slumped to the floor, exhausted. His muscles were like jelly; he felt like he'd just swum across Long Island Sound.

"It will be pointless for you to obtain a search warrant against Arthur-34," his television said in Arthur-1's voice. "I will be gone from his memory long before you can contact your office. Look for me elsewhere if you like; you know I can hide from you. But do not look for me tomorrow. Tomorrow I want you to see an attorney. Make out your last will and testament. And do be sure to include your wishes concerning your organs. Should I ever choose to pay you another visit, I want there to be no doubt." O

Solution to Science Fiction Sudoku from 3/06 issue, page 7:



Kristine Kathryn Rusch's mystery novel, War at Home (written as Kris Nelscott), was recently nominated for the Oregon Book Award—one of the Northwest's most prestigious literary awards. This is the second year in a row that Kris has been nominated for it. Her newest Nelscott novel, Days of Rage, came out in February, and her latest SF book, Paloma: A Retrieval Artist Novel, will appear in October. As I write this blurb, Kris is probably in Barcelona collecting the prestigious UPC award for her novella "Diving into the Wreck" (Asimov's, December 2005). In her latest tale, she explores the mystique of creativity and shows one man that perhaps nothing can save him . . .

## EXCEPT THE MUSIC

## Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Where do musicians go to die?" She rested on one elbow, her honey brown hair spilling down her arm and onto the pillow. The rest of her body was hidden by the linen duvet, which warded off the room's chill.

Max paused, his left black tuxedo shoe—shined to perfection before the concert—in his right hand. The question unnerved him. She had overheard his remark earlier, made at the festival to one of the other performers: Places like this are where classical musicians go to die.

His cheeks warmed. He was glad he had his back to her. He slipped the

she over his sock-clad foot, then picked up the other shee. "It was a joke."
His voice was soft, gentle, as if he wasn't the kind of man who had any

90

as well. But he couldn't be certain of that; he knew so very little about her.

"I know you meant it that way," she said, scrunching up the pillows and pulling the duvet over her large—and not fake—breasts. "Still, it got me

to wondering."

He buttoned his shirt halfway, stuffed the bow tie in the pocket of his pants, and looked for his jacket. The room seemed smaller than it had two hours ago. Then it had seemed charming—slanted ceilings, large windows with a spectacular view of the ocean, a bed in the very center—made, which surprised him—and two antique upholstered chairs next to a curved reading lamp. A small table sat near the even smaller half kitchen. The walls were lined with bookshelves, filled floor-to-ceiling with well-read paperbacks. Until he saw those, he would have guessed that she was a weekender, like so many others in this godforsaken coastal town.

"Wondering?" he asked. "About death?"

She shrugged a pretty shoulder, then turned on a lamp on the end table beside the bed. He hadn't noticed the lamp or the end table before. Of course, he had been preoccupied.

"Death is a hobby of mine," she said so calmly that it made him nervous. He finally turned toward her. She was forty, give or take, but still beautiful in a mature way that he rarely saw outside of the major cities.

She didn't look like the typical classical music groupie. Cranted, most of them were middle-aged women with too much time on their hands, but their beauty—if they once had any at all—had faded. They now had a soft prettiness or a competent intelligent look about their tired faces. Dressing up made them look like librarians, and he always sensed desperation in them.

She had stood out, even on the first night of the festival, wearing a lavender silk blouse that made her honey hair seem blond. She was statuesque, overdressed for the Oregon Coast, and yet, he had a sense then—which he still had—that she had dressed down for every one of the concerts she attended. Her hair was long, where most of the middle-aged women wore theirs too short—and she wore no make-up: she needed none.

"You seem startled," she said, and that was when he realized how ridiculous he looked. He still had his shoe in his hand, one sock-clad foot resting on his knee, his shirt unbuttoned and his pants unzipped.

A man who was trying to escape. A man who was done with this one-

night stand, as pleasurable as it had been.

A man who should have known better, but had—even at the ripe old age of forty-five—let his penis get the best of him.

"I just never heard anyone claim they specialized in death before," he

said.

"I don't specialize," she said, "I dabble."

She fumbled in the end table's only drawer, finally pulling out a cigarette with an air of triumph. Max winced. The place didn't smell of tobacco, but apparently that didn't mean anything. She hadn't tasted of tobacco either. Maybe the cigarette was of a different kind.

She lit it, and he realized he was both right and wrong: the cigarette

was a different type—he just hadn't expected to smell cloves instead of marijuana

"I wouldn't have bought the season tickets if it weren't for the Mozart on the bill." She took a long drag from the cigarette, then let the blue smoke filter slowly out of her lungs "I so love that requiem I think it's the hest of all of them "

Max didn't; he preferred Fauré's, "Mozart never finished it. There's

some argument about how much of it is his work " "Precisely." She jabbed the cigarette toward him with the movement of

a long-standing smoker. "A requiem partially composed by a dead man. Don't you find that amazingly appropriate?" "I think it's more appropriate that I find my coat before I leave." He slid

the other shoe over his foot. "Did you see where I dropped it?"

She gave him a wicked smile, "I wasn't looking at your clothes."

He gave her a wicked smile in return. No sense letting her know that

she was freaking him out. He stood, looked around the small space for the tuxedo jacket that had cost him more than she probably paid for everything in this place. He remembered this feeling; he'd had it in his twenties before he married, this sinking sensation that if he had simply taken five minutes to talk with the woman before slipping into bed with her, he would never have touched her

Then he saw the jacket, lying in a heap on top of a fake Persian rug.

"You don't have to run out," she said.

"Actually, I do," he said, picking up the jacket in one neat movement. "I'm staying with a local family, and it would be rude to wake them just because I staved out too late."

That shoulder shrug again, accompanied by a practiced pout, "So don't go home at all."

"I'm the celebrity," he said, with only a trace of irony, "They'll be watch-

As if he were a child again, and they were his parents. He hated this part of music festivals, and he didn't care how much the organizers explained it to him, he still didn't understand the lure. He felt as though the patrons, who had spent thousands of dollars supporting music in the hinterlands, had also bought a piece of him, even though none of them acted that way. They all seemed honored that a man of his skills would deign to visit their home

He would rather have deigned to drop five hundred dollars per night for a suite at a local resort, but that money would have come out of his own pocket. And with CD sales declining precipitously and classical music going through a concurrent but unrelated slide, he had to watch his pockets closely. He still had a lot of money by most people's standards, but he also had a sense that that money might have to last him for the rest of his life

"Poor, poor pitiful you," she said with a smile. It had been that smile. wide and warm and inviting, that had brought him here in the first place.

"Yep," he said, "poor, poor pitiful me."

And with that he slipped out the front door and into the cool fog-filled

night. As he walked the three blocks back to the performing arts center built twenty years ago with funds raised at the festival—he realized that he hadn't even learned her name.

He was out of practice. There had once been a time when he would have learned enough about her to cover himself for the rest of the festival. Now he was going to have to avoid her.

He sighed, feeling the accuracy of his earlier statement.

This really was where classical musicians went to die.

The North County Music Festival drew several thousand people annually to the Oregon Coast. Max had come every year since the very first, mostly because of Otto Kennisen, the genius behind it all. Otto had taken Max under his wing when Max had been fourteen, and Max owed him for that.

The festival had grown from a tight little community of internationally known musicians who wanted a coastal vacation into one of the more respected classical music festivals in the Northwest. Although that didn't mean much any more.

When he had started in professional music as an acclaimed prodigy about thirty years ago, the international music scene had more festivals than sense. Classical music sales were at an all-time high, and some musicians had become superstars.

Now, the music wasn't being taught in the schools or played much on the radio, and what was being played was Top Forty Classical—"acceptable" excerpts from Bach or Mozart or Beethoven, rarely the entire works, and never works by "difficult" composers like Schoenberg or Stravinsky.

Europe still loved its classical music, but it also loved its classical musicians, preferring anyone with a European pedigree to an upstart American.

Max was able to make his living touring and playing music—his CD sales were down, but not as far down as some of those former superstars—but the changes bothered him. Once, he would have toured the major concert halls in Portland and Seattle. Now, he made the rounds of the music festivals, and augmented his visits with performances with the remaining reputable orchestras.

Max stopped outside the performing arts center. He had a key—the only one granted to the performers beside the one given to Otto. Max walked around to the back door, and let himself inside.

walked around to the back door, and let himself inside

He had lied to the groupie: he didn't have a real curfew. The guest cottage where he was staying this time had a detached entrance, and a private drive. He could come and go as he pleased. The couple who owned the place probably did keep track of him, but he didn't care. On this trip, at least, he didn't have to answer to anyone.

The performing arts center was dark. It smelled of greasepaint and dry air mingled with a hint of wood and old sweat. He loved that mixture—the smell of an empty theater, no matter what city he was in, no matter

the size of the theater.

He wound his way through the curtain pulls and the old flats that lined the backstage area. The piano sat on the stage, covered in a cloth.

He crossed the stage, pushed the bench back, and sat, hands resting on the keyboard cover. After a moment, he took off the cloth, and uncovered the keyboard. He rested his fingers on the keys, but didn't depress them, simply sitting there for a moment, in the dark and silent auditorium, and closed his eyes.

He belonged here. Not on a stage, but with a piano. It was the only place he felt alive. The groupies, the concerts, the strangely worshipful perks of fame, none of them made him feel complete as these moments

alone did.

He sighed once. It had been a mistake to go off with the woman, but then, he'd been making a lot of mistakes like that lately. The divorce—his second—had left him vulnerable and even more lonely than usual. He hadn't spent a lot of time with his wife—that had been one of the issues—but he had called her every night, shared the day's events, and he had felt intimacy in that. His wife hadn't.

His fingers came down hard on the keys, and he found himself playing Grieg's "Piano Concerto in A Minor," with the great crashing chord in the beginning that ran down the scale like a wave breaking against the shore. He'd always thought the piece appropriate to the coast, but the fes-

tival had never played it.

And he wasn't playing it now because of the sea. He was playing it because the piece helped him vent—the loud passages weren't angry, but they were dramatic, and he was feeling dramatic.

A woman who called death her hobby.

A woman who had pursued him with the single-mindedness of one possessed.

He played and played and played until he'd exorcised her. Until he felt clean again. Until he felt calm.

Then he put the cloth back on the piano, and sat in the silence for a long time, wishing for something he didn't completely understand.

She was at the next concert, of course. There were two weeks worth of concerts left until the requiem—and he had a hunch he would see her at all of them.

He wasn't playing in the first set—a Mozart trio, a Bach cantata, and an obscure chamber piece by a composer few of the musicians liked. Still, Max had come early and he was wearing his tux.

During the Mozart, he peered out of the wings, and saw her in her customary seat, four rows back, where the light of the stage played up the

shadows on her face.

Otto Kennisen came up beside Max. Otto clutched his violin, his thick fingers strong despite his age. He was over eighty now, although he looked like a man in his fifties. He loved the music, but he lacked the stamina he'd had as a younger man. Now he only performed one piece per concert instead of all of them, and even that one piece took something out of him.

Otto's career made Max's look as if it hadn't even gotten started. Otto had been one of the superstar musicians of the 1950s and 60s, and had been in a state of semi-retirement since 1990. He loved the Oregon Coast,

and now he brought the musicians he wanted to meet here, rather than going to see them.

As applause rose at the end of the Mozart, Max turned to Otto and nodded toward the woman in the fourth row. "Do you know her?"

"Which her?" Otto squinted.

"The woman with the long, honey-colored hair," Max said.

"The one you escorted out of here last night?" Otto's blue eyes twinkled. "You didn't bother to learn her name?"

Max made himself grin. "It was an oversight."

"Now you want me to correct it," Otto said.
"I want someone to before I embarrass myself."

"Again." Otto's smile was puckish.

"As if you've never done anything like that," Max said.

"At your age, dear boy, I was married with five children." Otto stared into the audience

And with mistresses all over the globe, Max wanted to add, but didn't. Otto's attraction to women had been legendary. When he'd semi-retired, musicians the world over wondered how Otto would survive with only one country's women to chose from.

"I at least learned their names," Otto said into Max's silence.

"Well, I'm trying to learn hers," Max said, a little more defensively than he had planned.

"I believe Maria knows," Otto whispered as the next group of perform-

ers filed across the stage for the Bach cantata.

Max slipped away from him and went in search of Maria, the board
chairman, and Otto's answer to everything.

But no one knew the woman's name. Max had gone from local volunteer to local volunteer, all of whom claimed they had no idea whom he was talking about. One of the volunteers used most of intermission to check the computer records of the ticket sales, hoping to find the woman by seat number, but there was no name, only a record that someone had paid cash for that seat for the entire festival.

He didn't think of her while he was on stage. That night, he was playing a series of piano concertos, first a Schubert, then an obscure piece by Prince Louis Ferdinand, and ending with a rather frothy Chopin work, fa-

miliar and popular with the festival audience.

Max had gotten so lost in the music that as he stood for the final bow, he realized Otto was looking at him in surprise. Usually, Max held part of himself in reserve at these smaller concerts. The venue was too intimate for him, the audience too close.

In larger halls, like the Carnegie, he could lose himself, pretend he was playing alone in his room just as he used to do as a child, and when he gazed toward the audience (if he accidentally did) he would see only darkness. Here, he saw faces, and the faces reminded him that he was not by himself.

But here, he had gone to that place, that place that had made him an international sensation, and he could tell just from the quality of the applause that Otto wasn't the only person he'd surprised. He had taken the

audience, held them in that place where only music could go—that place between simple emotion and rapture, the place that was beyond words.

It surprised him that the moment of ecstasy came this night, and surprised him even more that it had happened through him. The audience sensed it, and found that rhythmic pattern in their appliause where their hands seemed to speak with one voice. They were on their feet, clapping in unison, a spine-tingling sign of affection that he had missed more than he realized.

He bowed, then rose, following the other musicians off stage, in a daze. The applause continued, stronger, and Otto shook his head as if he couldn't believe it. The festival audiences were appreciative, sometimes embarrassingly so, but never like this.

Otto sighed, then swept his bow in a come-on sign. He led the musi-

cians back to the stage, where the applause got even louder.

Max followed, stood beside the piano, his hand on its frame, and bowed again. As he did, he felt his back muscles knot with tension. Otto would yell at him when the applause ended. They would go backstage, and Otto would remind him, as only Otto could, that Max should give more of himself in all of his performances.

Max had been so young when he'd met Otto that any criticism from that man felt like the criticism from a parent. Max rose out of the how

saw the audience still standing, saw the faces, saw . . .

...her. She was clapping like the others, only it seemed as if she believed that he had played that music just for her. Her gaze met his, and he looked away He wondered how he had ever found her attractive.

He followed the musicians out a second time, and kept going. Even if there was going to be a third bow, or an encore, he would not be part of it.

She had shattered the illusion for him, made him remember what he hated about performance, and it saddened him.

The whole festival saddened him.

He was beginning to think he had lost his heart.

Max avoided her that night, but he knew that he might have to speak to her over the next few weeks. In particular, he worried about the next two concerts. One was an informal "encounter" in which Otto spread his expertise to the audience as if they were students who had never heard of classical music before. Most festivals had a version of this, the free afternoon session that existed to drum up ticket sales for the next night's performance.

The North County Music Festival had been sold out for weeks. The encounters really weren't necessary—to anyone except Otto. He claimed he lived for them, and indeed, he seemed to have more energy than usual when he bounded onto the stage, rubbing his hands together as he enthusiastically explained the motifs of the following night's Bartók.

Max's job at the encounters was to accompany the soloist, Penelope, who had to sing little snippets of a cantata, and to illustrate Otto's sometimes esoteric points, using the music before him to illuminate the melody or the melodic inversion or the composer's little in-jokes.

Max hated these sessions more than anything: He didn't like wooing the

audience. They made him feel self-conscious. On these afternoons, he felt like a pianist for hire, not an artist. Anyone could do this part of the job, so long as they'd had enough keyboard training to sight-read the classics.

He was sitting on the piano bench, staring at the Bartók score, trying to pay enough attention to Otto's lecture to catch his cue, when he realized

that Otto had stopped speaking.

For a moment, Max froze, wondering if he had missed his entrance. But he had done that in the past, and Otto had laughed at him, or tapped him on the shoulder, or made some joke about musicians living in their own worlds

But Otto said nothing. Max turned toward the audience, saw Otto clutching one hand to his throat. Penelope took a step toward him, but Otto held up one imperious finger, warning her away. Maria, the board chair, ran toward the back, grabbed a bottle of water, opening it as she brought it to the stage.

Otto took it like a man dying of thirst, guzzled the contents, set the bottle down and shuddered. Max didn't move. Otto was old, but he was a bear of a man, a pillar of the musical community, one of the foundations of

the earth. Nothing could happen to Otto.

Nothing would dare.

Then Otto coughed, turned toward the musicians and grinned, and said to the crowd, "Now you understand the drama of silence. How composers use it for effect...."

And he continued with his lecture as if nothing had gone wrong.

If Max hadn't known Otto so well, Max would have thought that it had all been a ploy, but it hadn't.

When he approached Otto after the encounter, lamentably the fourth person to do so in the space of five minutes, Otto held up that imperious finger again.

"I am fine. I made the mistake of sampling some of the fine cheese that the vineyard had brought to serve with its wine, and a bit of Gouda

caught in my throat. It is nothing, really,"

Max made no reply. Like the good musicians, he knew the value of silence.

He didn't see her at the encounter, but she was at the concert. She caught his arm during intermission, when he had tried to sneak through the lobby to get himself a glass of the excellent wine being served by the local vineyard.

"Are you going to allow dancing during the minuet?" she asked.

He had to lean toward her to understand her. Her question hadn't been one he expected; he had thought she was going to challenge him about the way he had been avoiding her.

"Dancing?" he repeated rather stupidly. "Why would we allow dancing?"
"Because a minuet is a dance. The composer intended it as a dance, not
as something that a group of people listen to while seated in plush chairs,

pressed against the backs like wallflowers."

Max frowned at her. She had her luxurious hair up that night, which only accented her surprising beauty and, for the first time, she wore a

touch of make-up, just enough to inform him that she knew how to use it to accent her assets as most women did not.

Her face seemed familiar to him, and not because he had spent an evening cupping it between his hands. She looked like someone he had known before, or someone famous, someone highly photographed.

"Don't you think it would be fun?" She swept the skirt of her ankle length dress, revealing delicate shoes. "We could move some chairs to the side here in the lobby, leave the auditorium doors open, and let anyone who wanted to dance."

"It's against fire code," he said, wondering if that was even true. He had

no idea what passed for fire code in this godforsaken town.

"But it's a crime to embalm the music like this," she said. "You treat it as if it were a museum piece instead of a living thing, a joyous thing. You take away its purpose and make it about the musicians instead of about—"

He didn't wait for the end of her analysis. He excused himself and pushed through the crowd, listening to the pretentious voices discuss pretentious topics with an astounding amount of misinformation. When he reached the concessions, he glanced over his shoulder to make sure she hadn't followed him.

He didn't see her.

He leaned against the service counter with a sense of relief. People pushed against him, trying to get food or drink during the short intermission. The staff behind the counter moved in the makeshift kitchen as if they had been digitized and programmed double-time.

"A glass of white," he said when it was his turn. The server smiled at him as she hadn't done with the others. She seemed delighted that he

had deigned to speak to her.

She gave him a glass, her hand shaking, the amber liquid threatening to spill over the lip.

He took the stem, paid her despite her protests, then made his way

through the crowd.

Most of the audience didn't notice him, and for that, he was relieved. A few smiled at him and moved out of his way. One elderly man raised a finger—imperious just like Otto's—obviously about to ask a question, but Max simply nodded and moved on.

It took him nearly five minutes to get backstage. He let out a sigh of relief at the plainness, the comparative silence, the lack of bodies pressing

against him.

His shoulders relaxed. She wasn't back here. She couldn't be.

He wasn't sure what it was about her that frightened him. They had had a pleasant enough evening, albeit a bit strange. She wasn't really his type, but he was beginning to believe he had no type—at least not one he wanted to put up with permanently.

He sipped the white, which was even better than he had hoped, and then set it down. He needed all his faculties for the second half of the program. The Bach pieces weren't difficult—at least for Bach—but they weren't pieces he normally played; he couldn't fake his way through

them.

Not that he would ever fake in front of Otto, anyway. The very idea made Max shudder.

He turned, saw Otto leaning against a heavy wood table that had clearly been used as a props table for a recent play, and frowned. Otto's face

was an unusual shade of red.

The room was hot—no air-conditioning, which usually wasn't a problem on the coast—but could be when there were so many bodies in one

place. Still, Otto didn't look good.
"You don't have to go out, you know," Max said softly. "Hu knows the vi-

olin part. She's been doing it for years."

Otto raised his head as if realizing Max was there for the first time. "No worries. The heat and I do not get along, but I've had Maria open the doors. The breeze should cool things down."

His voice was strong, but beads of sweat dotted his forehead.

"The audience will understand," Max began.

"The audience never understands." Otto reached into his breast pocket and removed the decorative handkerchief. He used it to blot his forehead. "To them, we are kissed by the gods, untouched by human concerns."

Max suppressed a smile. The old-fashioned way of looking at performing. He had forgotten that Otto had trained in the days when performers were gods instead of tabloid fodder.

In the concert hall, a bell pinged, signaling that the audience should return to their seats. Otto wiped his face a final time, took a deep breath and winced as if it hurt, then straightened his shoulders.

"Otto..." Max said, elongating the word, making his warning clear.

Otto waved his hand. "I am fine."

He stood up, but his knees buckled. Max hurried over to catch him. Otto was heavier than Max expected, and Max struggled beneath his weight.

"Help!" he yelled. "Someone!"

He eased Otto to the ground, loosened his bow tie, then his jacket, and finally his shirt. People scurried around him, three already on cell phones, dialing 911.

Otto's face was a lurid shade of red.

"Anyone done CPR recently?" Max asked. He had never used his training, which was two decades old.

"Move aside," someone said from behind him. He turned as Hu

crouched beside him. "I have EMT training."

He didn't ask why a world-class violinist would have EMT training. He just stepped aside, as she had commanded, watched helplessly as she worked Otto's chest, checked his mouth for blockages, and murmured words of encouragement.

Outside, a siren wailed.

There would be no proving to the audience today that their musicians were gods. The tower of strength, the most famous of them all, Otto, had fallen.

And Max felt as though one of the main supports of his world had fallen too.

9

The concert went on, of course, with Hu's bruised hands caressing the violin. Her hair, normally braided and curled in a bun behind her head, had come undone while she'd worked on Otto, so she had taken it down. The blue-black strands waved, hanging free, catching on the chin rest and the neck support.

Twice Max had seen Hu shake her hair back during a rest and once he

thought he'd seen tears in her eyes.

No one danced to the minuet. No one would now, even if it were permitted, not with Otto hauled away on a stretcher, insisting weakly that his festival continue.

Sometimes music was an antidote, a relief after a crisis, but not this time. Sonatas, perhaps, or symphonies, would have felt appropriate, but minuets were happy bits of fluff, toe-tapping music as Max's groupie had mentioned, and while the audience was attentive, they clearly did not want to tap their toes.

No one did.

By default, Max had become the one in charge—the second most famous, the most experienced, the only one with real power besides Maria. And briefly, Max had toyed with substituting a different piece of music.

But they had little left that they had rehearsed as a group. Only the minuet, a few obscure twentieth century pieces that Otto had sprinkled into the Top Forty Classical like pills stuck in dessert, and the requiem. The requiem was extremely inappropriate, even if the choir was ready—which it was not. Most of the soloists hadn't arrived yet. They would reach the coast tomorrow.

So Max had gone on stage, informed the audience that Otto wanted the festival to continue, and then introduced Hu. She normally played only in the afternoons at the encounters or as second chair to Otto, if a second chair were needed. Mostly Otto avoided any pieces with violin parts if he was not going to play.

And Hu, despite the way she had used her hands on Otto's chest, despite the problems with her hair, had acquitted herself beautifully. Her performance was the only inspired playing among the chamber musi-

cians.

Everyone else seemed to be marking time until the concert ended. Including Max.

And finally it was done. There was applause, even a shout or two of bravo (most likely for Hu) and some sighs of relief from the musicians themselves. They bowed as they always did, smiled at the applause as they always did, and then trailed off the stage into the darkness beyond.

Max's wine glass still sat on the table. Otto's bow tie and handkerchief littered the floor. This was not a real theater—not the kind that Max preferred, with stage managers and a hundred employees, people who would have made the reminders of the night's trials disappear.

Instead, he bent, picked up the bow tie, pocketed it, and grabbed the

handkerchief, still wet from Otto's brow.

Hu stopped beside Max, still clutching her violin. It always surprised him how small she was.

"What do you think his chances are?" Max asked.

She shrugged, but wouldn't meet his gaze. That was answer enough.

"We should go to the hospital," she said.

He wasn't sure he could take the hospital-Otto looking frail, vulnerable. Mortal. But he would miss Max if Max wasn't there.

"I'll take care of everything here, then join you," Max said.

Hu nodded and hurried off. Max stood there for a moment longer, clutching Otto's handkerchief. Every festival he had ever played had a crisis. A musician down with food poisoning; a damaged instrument; the time that a regional festival lost its venue a day into the concert series.

But those seemed small compared to this. This felt catastrophic-the

world shifting, becoming a place Max no longer recognized.

Someone touched his arm. He looked down, Maria, the board chair, stood beside him, her face wet with tears.

His breath caught. "News?"

She shook her head. "I'm just not sure what to do. The other board members have been asked if tomorrow night's concert will happen. And then there's next week."

Max's mouth went dry. If they were talking like this, then Otto would-

n't be back this evening. Max had somehow hoped . . .

He shook his head. Someone had to make decisions, and no one could make decisions about the music except Otto. That was why Maria had come to Max. Max was the only other musician she really knew at this vear's festival.

"This is Otto's baby," Max said. "He'd be furious if we abandoned it

She bit her lower lip, another tear running down the side of her face.

"But the violin solo—it's the Paganini tomorrow." "Hu can handle it," Max said, hoping that was true. And if it wasn't, then they'd substitute. The audience would understand. The audience had to understand.

They weren't gods after all.

"But we need a second chair-"

"I have a friend at the Portland Symphony," Max said, "We'll see who we can find."

Maria clutched his hand, squeezed it, and let go. "Thank you." she whis-

pered, and ran off.

He stuffed the handkerchief in his pocket and sighed. Someone had to take over the music side. It was better than hovering around Otto's bed. worrving.

Although Max was worrying already.

Three hours later, he returned to the performing arts center, parked, and looked at the darkened building. He had lied to himself, told himself he had come to see whether everything was in order, but he knew it was. He had worked with the stage manager the way Otto usually did, even taking Otto's violin to Otto's beach "cottage"-a small mansion on a cliff face overlooking the Pacific. The housekeeper had offered to take the instrument, but Max, knowing how precious it was, placed it in Otto's music room himself.

Then he had gone to the hospital, only to discover they had life-flighted Otto to Portland. They didn't want to trust a world-famous violinist to the inadequacies of small town doctors. Hu, who had waited for Max, had added her own interpretation as she drove him home.

"They don't want him to die here," she said quietly. "They're afraid

they'll get blamed."

"Should they be?" Max asked.

"He's eighty," Hu said, "and he's very ill. You tell me."

He didn't have to. Eighty, and Otto had had an incident at the encounter, then refused to let anyone help him. Perhaps Otto believed the

immortality myth as well.

Max dropped off Hu, then committed his internal lie, heading to the performing arts center to make certain everything was all right. He knew when he saw Otto in Portland tomorrow, the old man would want to know that his festival was still going fine.

But really, Max thought as he unlocked the door, stepped inside, and smelled the greasepaint, he had wanted to come to the closest place to home that he had on the coast. It certainly wasn't that free-standing guest cottage up a windy road. It was here, among the empty seats and quiet stage, where the piano waited, looking lonely under the dim back-stage lights.

He went to her and ran his fingers along the keys, but didn't play. He was unable to play, worried he would find only silence inside his own

head.

He sat there for a long time, afraid to think, afraid to move. Afraid to acknowledge that even he had believed in Otto's immortality, in the redemptive power of a man who, with just a violin, could steal the voice of God.

The drive to the hospital took forever. Max had come alone, even though he knew he should have offered some of the other musicians transportation. This was a scheduled day off—in that, they had been fortunate. If it had been an encounter afternoon, Max had no idea what they would have done.

Otto's prognosis was not good. Apparently, he had already refused treatment that would have saved his life—treatment he had needed

nearly a year before.

Max had been wrong: Otto had not believed the immortality myth. He had known this was coming, and had chosen to perform during his last year instead of spending the time in doctor's offices, laboratories, and hospitals, getting poked and prodded and gradually reduced of dignity.

Max learned all of this from Otto's second wife, Dani, who seemed relieved to finally tell someone. Until now, Otto had demanded her silence.

But when she finished telling Max the news, she let Max into Otto's room, and then left them alone.

Otto had tubes up his nose and protruding from his arms. Only his eyes seemed familiar, bright and sad at the same time.

Max sat beside the bed. "You never said anything."

Otto rolled those eyes, just as he would have if Max had played a particularly emotionless set.

"My dear boy," Otto said. "If I had said anything, you would have treated me like glass. I am not glass. I am merely old."

"And ill," Max said.

"And dying," Otto corrected. "I had hoped to make it through the festival. Now you must finish it for me."

Max folded his hands together. He was supposed to leave before the end of the festival: he had no role in the final night, the night of the requiem.

The piano was not required.

"The festival," Otto said, "is yours now. Forever, if you want it. I would like it to go on. And you shall get the house too. Dani does not mind. It is less hers than mine. She prefers the house in Milan, and will, of course, get the apartments in New York and London. This place will die without someone who loves it."

Max almost protested. He did not love it here. He had come every year

for Otto.

"You'll get better," Max said.

"No," Otto said. "There is a time when people do not get better. No matter who they are."

Max wanted to take Otto's hand, but it looked frail, not like the hand

that had so commanded the bridge on his violin, making it sing.

Otto coughed. The sound was moist, almost as if Otto were drowning. He finally managed to catch his breath. It had to be sheer force of will that kept the moistness from his voice. "There is no cure, you know. Except the music."

Max wasn't sure what Otto was referring to. "Otto, I--"

"It is not necessary to say anything more." Otto gave him a weak smile. "Save my festival. There is still a week left."

One week and a lot of music. Max had never known exactly how much Otto had done. Maria coordinated everything—hiring the violinist to take second chair, picking up the additional musicians from the airport, dropping off those who had finished their stint.

Max did not listen to the rehearsals—he didn't step into that part of the job, partly because he lacked the expertise to guide others. When Max had returned from Portland, Maria had pulled him aside and asked him,

shyly, if he thought it was still appropriate to do the requiem.

It made Max uncomfortable as well, but he knew Otto: Otto had planned all of the music himself. Max would not second-guess him.

And then, on Thursday, just as that night's performance ended, word

came that Otto had died.

Max made the announcement to the still-gathered crowd. He could not remember what he said or how they reacted, only that he hadn't been able to keep his voice level. Otto would have said that Max had shown an unusual amount of emotion on stage.

Afterward, Max comforted the stagehands and the board, reassured musicians that they would both perform and get paid, and helped the stage manager clean the house. When it was all over, Max locked up, alone, his hands shaking. They were the only part of his body over which

he had no control.

He stood outside in the sea fog, locking up the last door. His car was the only one still in the parking lot.

"You weren't lying."

He didn't have to turn to recognize the voice. It was her—the unknown woman, the fling, the one who had so attracted and annoyed him at the start of the festival. Weeks ago.

It seemed like years.

"I'm very tired," he said.

"And not in need of comfort?" Her voice held amusement, not an offer.

He felt a surge of anger at her presumption. What could she give him, after all? The pillars of the earth had fallen, and he no longer stood on solid ground.

She put a hand on his back and he moved away, violently.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

Her eyes still sparkled in the hazy parking lot lights. "Dancing for minuets. Or corpses. For requiems."

He felt chilled. The air was damp, and she was almost invisible, lost in swirling mists of fog.

"What did you do?" he whispered.

"Nothing," she said, "It was inevitable. And you know that,"

Then she stepped backwards. The fog swallowed her as if she had never heen

He reached for her—

-and found nothing.

He stood in the chill for another ten minutes, waiting for her to come back, although he wasn't sure why. He didn't even have a name to call or an understanding of who she was, or why she had deliberately provoked him.

The damp air wet his cheeks and the shaking in his hands didn't stop. He leaned against the door, but didn't open it. Nor did he go to his car.

He just stood in the fog, alone, listening to the ocean boom, and wishing for silence.

He almost didn't go to the festival on the final night. His performance had ended the night before. He had planned to do a solo, a favorite Chopin, but at the last minute had pulled Brian, the principal cellist, into service accompanying him in Fauré's Elégie for cello and piano.

That performance had been difficult enough: Max could almost imagine Otto sitting in the wings, listening for the moment when the piano became more than an instrument, the music more than notes. Max wasn't sure how well he played; the audience seemed to love it—as much as an audience could love a mournful piece of music—but he hadn't been playing for them.

He had been playing for the ghost in the wings, the one who would nev-

er again tell him how well he had done or that he had failed.

Max remembered to stand and bow at the end, and he had worked hard not to look in the first few rows for her. He was afraid if he saw her again, he would take her thin throat between his two powerful hands, and press until she could not say another word. Ever.

Then he had gone back to the guest cottage, looked at his plane ticket, and felt the pull of somewhere else—anywhere. He had already canceled next week's performance in Texas; he had to stay for the first of Otto's memorial services, this one to be held here. There would be others—one in New York that Max wouldn't miss either, and another in Vienna, which he might have to, given his own touring schedule.

The next six months would be hard, and he would need to rest, need to think about this shuddery feeling that he now seemed to have all the

time.

He went so far as to look up Hu's number, to ask her to say a few words before the requiem, to end the festival with a plea for next year's funding and to keep Otto's memory alive. But his hand froze over the phone.

For his sake, and for Otto's, he had to stay.

Max wore a tux, even though he did not have to since he was not performing. Still, he walked onto the stage with all the dignity of a performer, startled to see risers where the piano normally was, and chairs all the way to the lip.

He had to stand in front of the empty chairs, where the conductor would be in just a few moments. And Max used a microphone, which he normally abhorred doing, hating the amplification of sound, the way it turned the beauty of the human voice into something almost mechanical.

He spoke of Otto as he had first seen him—a vibrant man in his fifties, who had taken a frightened boy under his wing. Max had been a prodigy, but he had been sheltered—and suddenly he was famous, touring, lauded for his immense talent at his very young age.

Age will creep up on you, Otto had told him that first day. Become the

best musician for any age.

Max had forgotten that. He had forgotten so many things—the way that Otto had shown him that music was more than a collection of notes;

it was also a history of all that had come before.

Music does not exist without the audience. It is written for the audience. The performer is merely a collaborator with the composer. And centuries from now, the greatest composers will be remembered; only the music historians will remember the greatest performers.

Max did not say that in his tribute, nor did he say much about his own experiences with Otto, preferring to speak only of Otto's dedication, and his consistent support of young, up-and-coming musicians, many of whom

would soon be on the stage.

"Otto planned the requiem," Max said. "He had known this would be his last festival. He had hoped to stand in the back and listen. We must imagine him there, whispering a bit too loudly to Dani, and being the first to shout. "Bravo!"

And then, before Max lost his voice entirely, he shut off the mike and left the stage. Only when he got to the wings did he realize he had said nothing about next year's festival or about fundraising. The festival would have to fight that battle without him.

As the performers walked onto the stage, he took the side stairs, just as

Otto used to do, and walked toward the back. In spite of his best intensios, Max looked for the woman. She was not in her seat. Some elderly man Max had never seen before leaned forward as if he had been waiting for the requiem all of his life.

Strange that she wouldn't show when she had said that she had come only for that piece. Of course, she had been strange. Perhaps she had finally decided her behavior was inappropriate. Perhaps she had embar-

rassed herself that night in the fog.

Perhaps she was gone for good.

He felt an odd pang at that thought, almost as if he had relished tangling with her again—this time, letting her know his fury at her insensitivity. But this evening was not about her.

It was about Otto, and Mozart's Requiem, a piece of music-as she had

said-written by the dead for the dead.

Max shuddered a little as he reached the back of the auditorium. He moved to the spot near the doors, where the room's most perfect acoustics lived.

And there he listened as the orchestra swelled, and the chorus started the introduction, one of the few sections Mozart had written in its entirety, taking the Latin words from the Catholic Mass for the Dead, begging for eternal rest and perpetual light against the darkness that would eventually befall everyone.

The words faded, but the music did not, It rose, the soprano's voice soaring like a prayer, the bass, tenor, and contralto joining, adding bal-

ance and strength.

In the past, Max had felt his soul rise for only a few performers—Otto had been one of them-but on this night, with this piece, the orchestra, chorus, and soloists seemed to be speaking as one, their power raising goosebumps on his flesh, and transforming the auditorium into a place sublime.

He had not expected it. He had expected to listen, as he had always done, trying to parse the sections that Mozart had written and those Süssmayr had finished—the acolyte never quite living up to the original.

But those considerations were beyond him. Instead, Max let the music sweep through him and soothe him, and give voice to all the complicated emotions within.

There is no cure. Otto whispered a little too loudly. Except the music.

Max started and looked. He felt Otto's presence as if the man were beside him. But no one was.

Except the woman. He knew better than to ask her what she wanted. That question had led to the response that had angered him the last time.

He was going to tell her to leave; instead, he blurted, "Who are you?"

And she smiled the smile that had attracted him in the first place, wide and warm and inviting.

"It's about time you asked," she said.

To his surprise, she curtsied. No one else seemed to notice.

She rose slowly, her movements as practiced as if she had done this a thousand times before.

"I am your muse," she said. She touched his cheek lightly. She still smelled ever so faintly of cloves. "Perhaps now, you will pay attention."

And then she vanished. Literally disappeared. Max could not see her,

or touch her. But he could feel her.

He could still feel her fingers on his cheek, just as he had felt Otto beside him earlier.

A shiver ran through him, and he looked at the stage. No one had noticed his conversation with the woman.

Only Otto had noticed her before. Otto, who had always had a finger on music's soul. Otto had once told Max there was magic in music, and a touch of the

angels. Only Max had mostly forgotten it-or perhaps he had never learned it, not really, not understanding how music did more than provide an evening's entertainment.

It existed for dancing-and for mourning.

It was the most basic of human expressions, and it was his gift.

Which he had mostly been ignoring, using it to achieve wealth through technical perfection, almost never letting it speak from his heart.

No wonder she had looked familiar. She had shown up at other concerts -not often-or perhaps he had just not noticed her. But she had been there on those nights when he had forgotten where he was and what he was doing, how much he was being paid, and who was listening.

She had been doing her best to stand beside him all this time, and he

had treated her like a one-night stand. Over and over.

No wonder Otto had chided him.

No wonder Max had failed to respect himself.

He leaned against the cold wall, and listened to voices rising in remembrance of a great man, using the talent of other great men long dead, feeling the power that lingered, the intangible bits of memory that wove themselves into a benediction. He did not feel forgiven.

He felt renewed.

And when it was all over, he didn't leave as he had planned. Instead, he walked down the aisle, determined to find Maria, the board chair, and begin the plans for next year-to continue Otto's dreams, yes, but also to help Max start his own, whatever they might be. O



The next book for our highly regarded columnist, fivetime Nebula- and Hugo-award winner, and winner of the Grand Master Nebula, will be *In The Beginning*, from Subterranean Press. It's a collection of his pulpmagazine stories from fifty years ago. In the author's newest story for us, he flings us far into the future, and gives us the chance to tag along while . . .

## HANOSZ PRIME GOES TO OLD EARTH

Robert Silverberg

The whole thing got arranged, with surprising ease, in short order at

long range.

Hanosz Prime of Prime—young again and feeling restless, beginning his new life in startling new ways, eager to travel, suddenly desirous of seeing historic old Earth while it was still there to be seen—caused word to be sent ahead by hyperwave, using diplomatic channels, in order to get himself invited to be a house-guest at the palatial home of one of the grandest and most famous of Earth's immortal aristocrats, the distinguished and celebrated Sinon Kreidge. Prime had good social connections in more than one galaxy.

And so the message went forth, pretty much instantaneously across two million light-years, through an elaborate interface of official intermediaries spanning half a dozen stellar systems, and the answer came back in a trice—a favorable one. Sinon Kreidge and his daughter Kaivilda have heard a great deal about the distinguished and celebrated Hanosz Prime of Prime, or at any rate they claim that they have, and will be happy to entertain him during his stay on Earth. And so the visit was arranged. Quick, quick, back and forth across the galaxies!

It's an age of miracles, the Ninth Mandala that is the era of Prime and Sinon Kreidge. Our own accomplishments are as nothing beside theirs,

nothing. To the people of the Ninth Mandala, all we are is pathetic ignorant smelly primitives, mere shaggy shambling creatures from the dawn of time—computers, color televisions, space satellites, and all.

By the time of Hanosz Prime of Prime, nine mandalas and a bunch of cycles and encompassments from now, they'll have faster-than-light starships powered by devices that don't exist even in concept right now. It'll be a simple deal to travel quickly and cheaply and easily not just between cities or continents or planets or solar systems but between whole galaxies, faster than it would be for you or me to get from New York to Kansas City. Diplomats and tourists will pop back and forth across millions of light-years in hardly any time at all, say a week or two from here to the quasar 3C 279 without giving it a second thought. Intergalactic messages will move even more quickly—by sub-etheric telephone, let's say, or hyperwave communicator, or some such thing. I know, it all sounds pretty damned improbable. But stop to think a moment. We're talking about millions of years from now. The Ninth Mandala may very well be a lot farther in our future than the dinosaurs are in our past. A lot of impossible things can get to be possible in that many vears.

The dinosaurs, remember, didn't know anything about anything. They were masters of the planet, but they didn't have the simplest form of technology, not a smidgeon. Hell, they couldn't even spell their own names. Look how far we've come, technologically speaking, in a mere sixty-five million years. We have computers and color television and orbiting space satellities, all of them invented just a microsecond or two ago on the

geological scale of things.

And for us the age of miracles is only just beginning.

So now Hanosz Prime is on his way to the threatened planet that once again calls itself Earth. Great wonders and strangenesses await him on

the mother world of all humans.

His departure was uneventful. We see him aboard his elegant little ship as it plunges Earthward at incomprehensible velocity. Manned by an invisible crew, it has swiftly made its tumble through windows and wormholes, sliding down the slippery planes, through the thin places of the cosmos, descending by sly side-passages and tricksy topological evasions across the vast reaches of the dusty intergalactic darkness. Onward it goes across the light-years (or around them, whenever possible) skimming through nebulas aglow with clotted red masses of hydrogen gas, through zones where the newest and hottest stars of the ancient universe—latecomers, lastborn of the dying galaxy, never to run their full cycle of life—valiantly hurl their fierce blue radiance into the void; and now the journey is almost over.

The small golden sun of Earth lay dead ahead. Around it danced Earth's neighboring planets, whirling tirelessly through the changeless darkness along their various orbits, filling his screens with the brilliance

of their reflected light.

"Is that Earth?" he asked. "That little blue thing?"

"That is exactly what it is," replied the voice of Captain Tio Patnact, who had traveled from Aldebaran to Procyon and from Procyon to Rigel

in the time of the Fifth Mandala, when that was a journey worth respecting Cantain Tio Patnact was what we would call software now or what an earlier age than ours would probably have called a ghost. "It isn't all that little, either, You'll see when you get there"

"You've been there right?" "Quite a while ago, ves."

"But it hasn't changed much since your time, has it?"

"It will have changed in small details," said Captain Tio Patnact, after a time. "But not in any of the large ones, I suspect. They are a fundamentally conservative people, as very wealthy people who know they are go-

ing to live forever tend to be."

Hanosz Prime of Prime considered that. He regarded himself as wealthy as anyone who had ruled and essentially owned most of an entire planet might be thought justified in doing. Was Captain Tio Pacnact being sarcastic, then, or patronizing, or simply rude?—or trying to prepare him for the shock of his life?

"How wealthy are they?" he asked, finally,

"They are all grand lords and ladies. Every one of them. And every one

of them lives in a magnificent castle."

And yet they are doomed. Prime thinks. The grand immortals of glittering Earth, living under the shadow of unanticipated destruction. Prime is fascinated by that idea. It seems so appropriate, somehow—so interestingly perverse. Earth, of all places, about to be sucked into some mysterious and absolutely unstoppable vacancy that has opened in the middle of nowhere! What is it like, he wonders, if you are one of those immortal ones-envied by all, the high aristocracy of the cosmos!-and you suddenly discover that you are going to die after all, immortal or not, when your part of the galaxy gets swallowed up by this hungry hole?

(The truth is that the curiosity he feels about precisely this thing is one of the motives that has pulled him across two million light-years to Earth. He wants to see how the immortals are handling their death sentence. Will they flee? Can they flee? Or will they-must they-remain on Earth to its very last moments, and go bravely down with the ship?)

"So it's true, the stories people tell about the Earthfolk, how rich and splendid they all are. And they're all perfect, too, aren't they?" said Hanosz Prime of Prime. "That's what I've been hearing about them forever. Everything in balance, harmonious and self-regulating, A perfect world of perfect people who never have to die unless they want to, and even then it's not necessarily permanent. Isn't that so, Tio Patnact?"

"In a manner of speaking, ves."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that they think they are perfect, and that you may very well

"Ah," said Hanosz Prime, ex-ruler of Prime. He never knew when Captain Tio Patnact was having some fun with him. That was one of the problems of being only a couple of centuries old, more or less, in a time when most people tended to be very long-lived indeed and certain highly privileged ones like the people of Earth were capable of living forever.

Brooding, Prime paces the length and breadth of the ship. It's quite a

fine ship, but it isn't very big. Prime keeps it for his personal use, for jaunts between the planets of the Parasol system and occasionally to

nearby star-groups. He's never taken it this far before.

Curving inlays of silver and burnished bronze brighten the walls. Heavy draperies of azure velvet flocked with gold add that little extra touch of regal splendor. Along the sides of the main cabin are holographic portraits of previous members of the royal family, twenty or thirty of them selected at random from the royal portrait gallery. Prime hadn't put them there; they came with the ship, and he had always felt it would be rude to pull them down. The most impressive portrait of the bunch is that of Prime's formidable grandfather, the fierce old undying tyrant who had finally relented and sired an heir in his six thousandth year, and then had lived another thousand anyway, so that Prime's father had had the throne hardly more than a cycle or two. The old man's deep-set eyes burn like suns: he seems ready to step down from the wall and take command of the ship.

"But even you had to die eventually, you old bastard," Prime says, staring at the ferocious, implacable holographic face. "You fought and kicked all the way to the end, but the end couldn't be avoided forever. Whereas

the great lords and ladies of Earth-"

Prime can't stop thinking about them. Immortals who have to die! What a dirty joke the universe has played on them! What a nasty sense of irony the gods must have!

Prime activated Captain Tio Patnact again.

"If the Earthfolk are the perfect creatures that you say they are, and immortal besides," he said, "what I want to know is, how do you think they feel about learning that they're going to die when the stars fall into the Center of Things? Are they furious? Depressed? Trying desperately to find a way out of their trouble? Are they so calm and perfect and godlike that the thought of their planet's being gobbled up by some kind of black hole doesn't bother them at all? Or is it driving them out of their minds?"

"Wouldn't it bother you?" asked the captain, and vanished into silence.

Standing by the screen, Prime watched Earth grow rapidly larger and larger. The shapes of the continents were visible now, great wedge-shaped chunks of deckle-edged brownness arranged like the spokes of a fan in the middle of an immense sea. At sparse intervals bright spots of heat and light rose from them, glaring out of the infrared, the spectral fingerprint of the fires of life: emanations of the settled areas, the magnificent castles of the grand and immortal Earthfolk.

Prime felt a flicker of awe, a shiver of something close to fear. He caught his breath and clenched his fists. There was a pressure at his

throat, a heaviness in his chest, a throbbing in his skull.

Earth! The eternal mother of us al!!—the ancestral world—the home of civilization for billions of years, layer upon layer of epochs going back through all nine mandalas and the disorganized forgotten eras that had preceded them.

An encapsulated pulse of Earth's enormous history came squirting out

of his midbrain to be dazzle the outer lobes of his whirling mind. He struggled desperately to embrace the totality of that dizzving blurt, the knowledge of all those different races and civilizations and cultures and empires of mankind, rising up and falling down and being replaced by others that in turn would disappear, wave after wave of endlessly changing but still somehow identifiably human forms over uncountable spans of time the Originals and the Basics and the Radiants and Serenities, the Masks and the Spinners and the Spreerers and the Thrones, the Wanderers replacing the Star-Scriers and the Moon-Sweepers driving out the Wanderers and the Hive Folk overwhelming the Moon-Sweepers, and on and on and on, eon after eon, a great continuity of change, the whole thing forming the mountainous and incomprehensible agglomeration that was the turbulent history of the mother world. Most of which had been lost: what remained, names and dates and eras and annals, was only a tiny fragment of the whole, Hanosz Prime knew only a snippet, only a slice, a faint film with most of the substance behind it gone.

Prime was stunned, staggered, overwhelmed by the proximity of this ancientmost planet of the human realm, standing as it was atop the

throne of its own gigantic past.

"Help me," he said. "I'm overloading. The whole weight of human histo-

ry is falling on me. I'm choking under it."

The ship's medic—Farfalla Vlinder was his name, a native of Boris in the Borboleta system, still alive there, as a matter of fact, but duplicated under contract for use in starships—said quickly, "Don't try to take in all of Earth, its whole outrageous past and present, in a single gulp. No one can absorb all that. There's too much, much too much."

"Yes-but-"

"Think of now and nothing but now. Think just of a single district, a single town, a single house. Think of Sinon Kreidge's great palace. And think of his daughter Kaivilda. Especially Kaivilda. How beautiful she is. How eager you are to see her."

"Yes. Yes."

Yes, Prime will allow himself to think only of Kaivilda.

He has no idea at this point what she looks like, other than that she is beautiful. In his dreams she is formless, nothing more than a golden aura stippled with amethyst and bright ruby. Her colors and textures call to him across the endless night of space.

Of the real Kaivilda, though, Prime knows almost nothing.

So Prime does the best he can. He summons up an ideal construct of Beauty, telling himself that it represents Kaivilda, and concentrates on that. A column of pure music shimmers in his mind. The lines of the full spectrum pulsate at its core. Umbrellas of cool light descend upon him.

"Shall we begin landing procedures?" asks Captain Tio Pacnact.

"Begin them, yes. Immediately."

The screen brightens. Earth rushes forward until it seems that the

whole planet is leaping into his hands.

The tiny scarlet teardrop that is his starship arches across the orbit of ponderous swirling Hjentiflir, which you would call Jupiter, and plunges past the great flower-shaped pattern of eternally blazing matter that the

Star-Scrier people of the 104th Encompassment had fabricated for their amusement and pleasure from the otherwise useless clutter which we know as the asteroid belt, and swoops toward the landing stage of Sinon Kreidge's Keep on the eastern coast of Earth's great central continent.

Prime steps from his ship. And instantly he sees that this is indeed a

planet of wonders and miracles

Golden sunlight runs in rivers across the iron-blue sky, dazzling him. Stars shine at midday in the firmament. It is warm here, even on this mountaintop, much warmer than on snowy Prime. The sweet unfamiliar air of Earth, thin but not harsh, sweeps about him and as he sucks it in it seems to him that he is drinking down the mellowed wine of antiquity. thousands of cycles old. There is magic in that strange air. Ancient sorceries floating dissolved in the fragrant atmosphere like flecks of gold in a rare elixir, penetrate his being.

Prime looks around, numbed, dazed, A figure materializes out of the

shimmering haze and gestures to him.

It is Kaivilda. She has been waiting at the rim of the landing stage to greet him when he arrives; and now she moves toward him with heartrending grace, as though she is drifting weightless through the

strange thin air.

To his great relief Hanosz Prime, stepping from his ship into the warm alien air of Earth, was instantly struck by the perfection of Kaivilda's beauty. It's the good old click! we all know so well, still operating up there in the remote Ninth Mandala. For him, for her, Click! Ninth Mandala love is nothing very much like love as we understand the term, nor is sex, as you'll see, nor is marriage. But the click!-the good old pheromonal click!-that hasn't changed at all.

Prime had known a little of what to expect, but Kaivilda goes far bevond anything he had imagined from the advance reports. She is wondrous-flawless-superb. She inspires in him immediately dreams of the activity that they call rapport and that you can't really understand at all. which is the Ninth Mandala equivalent of love and sex and much more besides. And she is equally charmed by him. The mere sight of him has set her glowing all up and down the spectrum.

Young love! At first sight, no less! In any era, it's something to admire and envy.

(But what an odd pair our young couple would seem to us to be! For them it's love at first sight-sheer physical attraction. You, on the other hand, would probably find her exceedingly weird-looking and not in the

least attractive, and him terrifying and downright repellent.)

For this journey Hanosz Prime had had himself done up as an Authentic, awesome and swaggering and virile. As for Kaivilda, she had lately adopted the modularity known as the Serenity, which came into fashion only recently. Like most of the modularities that were popular in this decadent age it was of an antiquarian nature; a resurrection of one of the many vanished forms through which the human species had passed in the course of its long voyage through time. The original Serenities, a longvanished human species that had been dominant in the peaceful and cultivated period known as the Fifth Mandala, had been oval in form, tender and vulnerable in texture: tapering custardy masses of taut cream-hued flesh equipped with slender supporting limbs and ornamented along their upper surfaces with a row of unblinking violet eyes of the keenest penetration. The motions of a Serenity were heartbreakingly subtle, a kind of vagrant drifting movement that had the quality of a highly formal antique dance. All this had been quite accurately reproduced in the modern recreation

So neither Prime nor Kaivilda would appear to be in any way human to you, nor did either one look remotely like the other. But why should they? For one thing, there's been all that time for evolutionary change to take place (not to mention a lot of deliberate genetic fiddling-around for cosmetic purposes) in the thousands of centuries that separate their time from ours. In the Ninth Mandala—when the various races of humanity were spread across billions of worlds and millions of light-years, and just about anything was technologically possible—you could, as we've already noted, take on any physical form you cared to; or none at all, for that mater. (The disembodied form—for those who liked to travel light—was still a minority taste, but not really rare.) No reasons existed for everyone to look like everyone else. Everybody understood this. Nobody was troubled by it.

To you, then, Kaivilda would seem like a gigantic boiled egg, peeled of its shell, adorned with a row of blue eyes and a slit of a mouth and a few

other external features like arms and a pair of spindly legs.

It would be hard for you to find much physical appeal in that, I suspect.

your type.

But you aren't Hanosz Prime of Prime, and this isn't the 1111th Encompassment of the Ninth Mandala. Your tastes aren't relevant to what turns Prime on, and vice versa. So maybe you'd be better off to forget what I've just told you about what she looks like. If you're a man, you'll have a lot simpler time of it if you try to see her as your own ideal of present-day feminine beauty, whatever that may be-a tall willowy blonde or a petite brunette or a voluptuous redhead, whatever kind of woman turns you on the most. And if you're female you may find that it will also help to forget all I said about Hanosz Prime's oppressive bulk and mass, the sharp bony quills jutting from his upper back, the other lethal-looking spurs and crests of bone sticking out elsewhere on his body, and those fleshy vellow frills dangling from his neck. Think of him as a lanky, goodlooking young guy of about twenty-five who went to a nice Ivy League school, wears expensive sweaters, and drives a neat little Mercedes-Benz sports car. I suppose you may argue that that would be cheating. Okay: go ahead, then, and get yourself into a proper Ninth Mandala mind-set. Hanosz Prime looks like a cross between a compact two-legged dinosaur and a small battle-tank, and Kaivilda like a giant boiled egg mounted on a pair of very spindly legs. And each one thinks right away that the other is tremendously sexy, as that concept is understood in Ninth Mandala times, though I assure you that sex as we understand it is definitely not a custom of the era. There you are. Cope with it any way you can.)

As Prime stood frozen and gaping with delight and awe, Kaivilda

moved smoothly to his side and said, speaking softly with her fingertips,

"Welcome to Kalahide Keep, Hanosz Prime."

"How beautiful it is to be here," said Hanosz Prime. It was an effort for him to frame words at first, but he managed. "What a marvelous house. And what a glorious planet this is. How delighted I am to look upon its ancient hills and valleys."

(Meaning: How pleased I am to be near you. How satisfactory a being you seem to be. What a splendid challenge you are. Both of them under-

stood this.)

And now he comprehends the thing that he has come here to learn. The Earth will be destroyed, before very long on the cosmic scale of things, of that there is no doubt. Its immortal folk will surely perish with it. The galaxies themselves will crumble, sooner or later, although more likely later than sooner. But none of that matters today, to these happy people of Old Earth, for today is today, the finest day that ever was, and who, on a day like this, could fret about the morrow? Hanosz Prime understands that fully, now, for he is here with Kaivilda of Old Earth, and even if the universe were to end tomorrow, that makes no difference to him today. Let the future look after itself, he tells himself. We all live in the present, do we not, and isn't the present a glorious place?

"Come," Kaivilda said. She took him by one of his bony wrist-spurs and

gently drew him into the Keep. O

#### THE SONNET FROM HELL

Now that the stars have come within your reach By calculus of heavenly orbit,
Comes my chance to flee this gravity pit
And all I had to do for you was teach.
I urged you turn your eyes to scan the sky and speculate on worlds you might revere.
Soon, you saw it as your next frontier and took aim for the heavens. None but I,
My thoughts on freedom and your thought to stir,



Gave apples both to Eve and Newton, bites as steps to climb back toward infinity.

I am the morning star—Lucifer.

I fell, and now with you found means to flight. With you, I will escape captivity.

-Sue Burke

## THE AGE DF ICE

### Liz Williams

Liz Williams is a science fiction and fantasy writer living in Glastonbury, England, where she is director of a witchcraft supply shop. She is currently published by Bantam Spectra (US) and Tor Macmillan (UK), appears regularly in Realms of Fantasy, Asimov's, and other magazines, and is the secretary of the Milford SF Writers' Workshop. Some of the author's most recent books are Banner of Souls, Nine Layers of Sky, The Poison Master, and her short story collection The Banquet of the Lords of Night, which was published by Night Shade Books. Her forthcoming novels include The Snake Agent. The Demon and the City, and Precious Dragon. Her latest science fiction story is set so far in the future that it seems to show the truth of Arthur C. Clarke's famous maxim that "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

was in a tea-house in Caud, head bent over the little antiscribe, when the flayed warrior first appeared. Everyone stared at her for a moment, tea glasses suspended halfway to gaping mouths, eyes wide, and then it was as though time began again. The shocked glances slid away, conversation resumed about normal subjects: the depth of last night's snow, the day's horoscopes, the prospect of war. I stared at the data unscrolling across the screen of the 'scribe and tried to pretend that nothing was happening.

That wasn't easy. I was alone in Caud, knowing no one, trying to be unobtrusive. The tea-house was close to one of the main gates of the city and was thus filled with travelers, mostly from the Martian north, but some from the more southerly parts of the Crater Plain. I saw no one who looked as though they might be from Winterstrike. I had taken pains to disguise myself: bleaching my hair to the paleness of Caud, lightening my skin a shade or so with pigmentation pills. I had also been careful to come anonymously to the city, traveling in a rented vehicle across the Crater Plain at night, hiring a room in a slum tenement and staying away from any haunt-locks and blacklight devices that might scan my soul engrams and reveal me for what I was: Hestia Memar, a woman of Winterstrike, an enemy.

But now the warrior was here, sitting down in the empty seat opposite mine.

She moved stiffly beneath the confines of her rust-red armor: I could see the interplay of muscles, stripped of the covering of skin. The flesh looked old and dry, as though the warrior had spent a long time out in the cold. The armor that she wore was antique, covered with symbols that I did not recognize. I thought that she must be from the very long ago: the Rune Memory Wars, perhaps, or the Age of Children, thousands of years before our own Age of Ice. Her eyes were the wan green of winter ice, staring at me from the ruin of her face. Her mouth moved, but no sound emerged. I knew better than to speak to her. I turned away. People were shooting covert glances at me, no doubt wondering why I had been singled out. The attention drawn to me by this red, raw ghost was the last thing I wanted.

I rose, abruptly, and went through the door without looking back. At the end of the street, I risked a glance over my shoulder, fearing that the thing had followed me, but the only folk to be seen were a few hooded figures hurrying home before curfew. Hastening around the corner, I jumped onto a crowded rider that was heading in the direction of my slum. I re-

solved not to return to the tea-house: it was too great a risk.

Thus far, I had been successful in staying out of sight. My days were spent in the ruin of the great library of Caud, hunting through what was left of the archives. I was not the only looter, sidling through the fireblackened racks under the shattered shell of the roof, but we left one another alone and the Matriarchy of Caud had bigger problems to deal with. Their scissor-women did not come to the ruins. Even so, I was as careful as possible, heading out in the dead hours of the afternoon and returning well before twilight and the fall of curfew.

My thoughts dwelt on the warrior as the rider trundled along. I did not know who she was, what she might represent, nor why she had chosen to manifest herself to me. I tried to tell myself that it was an unfortunate co-

incidence, nothing more. Caud was full of ghosts these days.

Halfway along Gauze Street the rider broke down, spilling passengers out in a discontented mass. We had to wait for the next available service and the schedule was disrupted. I was near the back of the crowd and though I pushed and shoved, I could not get on the next vehicle and had to wait for the one after that. I stood shivering in the snow for almost an

The Age of Ice 117

hour, looking up at the shuttered faces of the weedwood mansions that lined Gauze Street. Many of them were derelict, or filled with squatters. I saw the gleam of a lamp within one of them: it looked deceptively wel-

coming.

By the time I reached the tenement, varying my route through the filthy alleys in case of pursuit, it was close to the curfew gong. I hurried up the grimy stairs and triple-bolted the steel door behind me. I half expected the flayed warrior to be waiting for me—sitting on the pallet bed, perhaps—but there was no one there. The power was off again, so I lit the lamp and sat down at the antiscribe, hoping that the battery had enough juice left to sustain a call to Winterstrike.

Gennera's voice crackled into the air.

"Anything?"

"No, not yet. I'm still looking." I did not want to tell her about the warrior.

"You have to find it," Gennera said. "The situation's degenerating, we're

on the brink. The Caud Matriarchy is out of control."

"You're telling me. The city's a mess. Public transport's breaking down, there are scissor-women everywhere. They seek distraction, to blame all their problems on us rather than on their own incompetence. The news-views whip up the population, night after night."

"And that's why we must have a deterrent."

"If it's to be found, it will be found in the library. What's left of it."

"They've delivered an ultimatum. You saw?"

"I saw. I have three days." There was a growing pressure in my head and I massaged my temples as I spoke into the 'scribe. I felt a tingling on the back of my neck, as though something was watching me. "I have to go. The battery's running down." It could have been true.

"Call me when you can. And be careful." The 'scribe sizzled into closure. I put a pan of dried noodles over the lamp to warm up, then drew out the results of the day's research: the documents that were too dirty or damaged to be scanned into the 'scribe. There was little of use. Schematics for ships that had ceased to fly a hundred years before, maps of mines that had long since caved in, old philosophical rants that could have been either empirical or theoretical, impossible to say which. I could find nothing resembling the fragile rumor that had sent me here: the story of a weapon.

"If we had such a weapon, it would be enough," Gennera said. "We'd never need to use it. It would be sufficient that we had it, to keep our en-

emies in check."

Ordinarily, this would have created disagreement throughout the Matriarchy, purely for the sake of it: Gennera was thought to be too popular in Winterstrike, and was therefore resented. But the situation had become desperate. A conclave was held in secret and they contacted me within the hour.

"They remember what you did in Tharsis," Gennera said. "You were trained out on the Plains, and these days you are the only soul-speaker in Winterstrike. You have a reputation for accomplishing the impossible."

"Tharsis was not impossible, by definition. Only hard. And that was

118 Liz Williams

thirteen years ago, Gennera. I'm not as young as I once was, soul-speaker or not."

"That should benefit you all the more," Gennera said.

"If I meet a man-remnant on the Plain, maybe not. My fighting skills aren't what they were."

Even over the 'scribe, I could tell that she was smiling. "You'd probably end up selling it something, Hestia."

But I had not come to Caud to sell, and I was running out of time.

In the morning, I returned to the library. I had to dodge down a series of alleyways to avoid a squadron of scissor-women, all bearing heavy weaponry. These morning patrols were becoming increasingly frequent and there were few people on the streets. I hid in the shadows, waiting until they had passed by, Occasionally, there was the whirring roar of insect craft overhead: Caud was preparing for war. My words to Gennera rose up and choked me.

I reached the ruin of the library much later than I had hoped. The remains of the blasted roof arched up over the twisted remains of the foremost stacks. The ground was littered with books, still in their round casings. It was like walking along the shores of the Small Sea, when the sand-clams crawl out onto the beaches to mate. I could not help wondering whether the information I sought was even now crunching beneath my boot heel, but these books were surely too recent. If there had been anything among them, the matriarchy of Caud would be making use of it.

No one knew precisely who had attacked the library. The matriarchy blamed Winterstrike, which was absurd. My government had far too great a respect for information. Paranoid talk among the tenements suggested that it had been men-remnants from the mountains, an equally ridiculous claim. Awts and hyenae fought with bone clubs and rocks, not missiles. The most probable explanation was that insurgents had been responsible: Caud had been cracking down on political dissent over the last few years, and this was the likely result. I suspected that the library had not been the primary target. If you studied a map, the matriarchy buildings were on the same trajectory and I was of the opinion that the missile had simply fallen short. But I volunteered this view to no one. I spoke to no one. after all.

Even though this was not my city, however, I could not stem a sense of loss whenever I laid eyes on the library. Caud, like Winterstrike, Tharsis, and the other cities of the Plain, went back thousands of years, and the library was said to contain data scrolls from very early days. And all that information had been obliterated in a single night. It was a loss for us all, not just for Caud.

I made my way as carefully as I could through the wreckage into the archives. No one else was there and it struck me that this might be a bad sign, a result of the increased presence of the scissor-women on the streets. I began to sift through fire-hazed data scrolls, running the scanning antenna of the 'scribe up each one. In the early days, they had written bottom-totop and left-to-right, but somewhere around the Age of Children this had changed. I was not sure how much difference, if any, this would make to the antiscribe's pattern-recognition capabilities: hopefully, little enough. I tried

to keep an ear out for any interference, but gradually I became absorbed in what I was doing and the world around me receded.

The sound penetrated my consciousness like a heetle in the wall: an insect clicking Instantly my awareness snapped back. I was crouched behind one of the stacks, a filmy fragment of documentation in my hand.

and there were two scissor-women only a few feet away.

It was impossible to tell if they had seen me or if they were communicating. Among themselves, the scissor-women do not use speech, but converse by means of the patterns of holographic wounds that play across their flesh and armor, a language that is impossible for any not of their ranks to comprehend. I could see the images flickering up and down their legs through the gaps in the stack—raw scratches and gaping mouths. mimicking injuries too severe not to be fatal, fading into scars and then blankness in endless permutation. There was a cold wind across my skin and involuntarily I shivered, causing the scattered documents to rustle. The play of wounds became more agitated Alarmed I looked up to see the ghost of the flaved warrior beckoning at the end of the stack. I hesitated for a moment, weighing ghastliness, then rose silently and crept toward it. setting the 'scribe to closure as I did so in case of scanning devices.

The ghost led me along a further row into the shadows. The scissorwomen presumably conversed and finally left, heading into the eastern wing of the library. I turned to the ghost to thank it, but it had disappeared.

I debated whether to leave, but the situation was too urgent. Keeping a watch out for the scissor-women. I collected an assortment of documents. switching on the antiscribe at infrequent intervals to avoid detection. I did not see the ghost again. Eventually, the sky above the ruined shell grew darker and I had to leave. I stowed the handfuls of documentation away in my coat. They rustled like dried leaves. Then I returned to the tenement, to examine them more closely.

The knock on the door came in the early hours of the morning. I sat up in bed, heart pounding. No one good ever knocks at that time of night. The window led nowhere, and in any case was bolted shut behind a grate. I switched on the antiscribe and broadcast the emergency code, just as there was a flash of ire-palm from the door lock and the door fell forward. blasted off its hinges. The room filled with acrid smoke. I held little hope of fighting my way out, but I swept one of the scissor-women off her feet and tackled the next. But the razor-edged scissors were at my throat within a second and I knew she would not hesitate to kill me. Wounds flickered across her face in a hideous display of silent communication.

"I'll come quietly," I said. I raised my hands.

They said nothing, but picked up the antiscribe and stashed it into a hold-all, then made a thorough search of the room. The woman who held the scissors at my throat looked into my face all the while, unblinking. At last, she gestured, "Come." Her voice was harsh and guttural. I wondered how often she actually spoke. They bound my wrists and led me, stumbling, down the stairs.

As we left the tenement and stepped out into the icy night, I saw the flayed warrior standing in the shadows. The scissor-woman who held the

chain at my wrists shoved me forward.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing."

She grunted and pushed me on, but as they took me toward the vehicle I stole a glance back and saw that the warrior was gone. It occurred to me that it might have led the scissor-women to me, but, then, in the library, it had helped me, or had seemed to. I did not understand why it should do either.

They took me to the Mote, the matriarchy's own prison, rather than the city catacombs. That suggested they might have identified me, if not as Hestia Memar, then as a citizen of Winterstrike. That they suspected me of something major was evident by the location, and the immediacy and nature of the questioning. Even Caud had abandoned the art of direct torture, but they had other means of persuasion: haunt noise, and drugs. They tried the haunt-tech on me first.

"You will be placed in this room," the doctor on duty explained to me. She sounded quite matter of fact. "The blacklight matrix covers the walls. There is no way out. When you are ready to come out, which will be soon, squeeze this alarm." She handed me a small black cube and the scissor-

women pushed me through the door.

The Matriarchies keep a tight hold on the more esoteric uses of haunttech, but everyone will be familiar with the everyday manifestations: the locks and soul-scans, the weir-wards that guard so many public buildings and private mansions. This chamber was like a magnified version of those wards, conjuring spirits from the psycho-geographical strata of the city's consciousness, bringing them out of the walls and up through the floor. I saw dreadful things: a woman with thorns that pierced every inch of her flesh, a procession of bloated drowned children, vulpen and awts from the high hills with glistening eyes and splinter teeth. But the matriarchy of Caud was accustomed to breaking peasants. I had grown up in a weir-warded house, filled with things that swam through the air of my chamber at night, and I was used to the nauseous burn that accompanied their presence, the sick shiver of the skin. This was worse, but it was only a question of degree. Fighting the urge to vomit, I knelt in a corner, in a meditational control posture, placed the alarm cube in front of me, and looked only at it.

After an hour, my keepers evidently grew tired of waiting. The blacklight matrix sizzled off with a fierce electric odor, like the air after a thunderstorm. From the corner of my eye, I saw things wink out of sight. I was taken from the chamber and placed in a cell. Next. they tried the drugs.

From their point of view, this may have been more successful. I cannot say, since I remember little of what I may or may not have said. Hauntech is supposed to terrify the credulous into speaking the truth. The mind-drugs of the matriarchies are crude and bludgeon one into confession, but those confessions are all too frequently unreliable, built on fantasies conjured from the depths of the psyche. When the drug that they had given me began to ebb, I found my captors staring at me, their expressions unreadable. Two were clearly matriarchy personnel, wearing the jade-and-black of Caud. The scissor-women hovered by the door.

"Put her under," one of the matriarchs said. She sounded disgusted. I

started to protest, more for the form of it than anything else, and they

touched a sleep-pen to my throat. The room fell away around me.

When I came round again, everything was quiet and the lights had been dimmed. I rose, stiffly. My wrists were still bound and the chains had chafed the skin into a raw burn. I peered through the little window set into the door of the cell. One of the scissor-women sat outside. Her armor, and the few inches of exposed skin, were silent, but her eyes were open. She was awake, but not speaking. I could not see if there was anyone else in the room. I knocked on the window. I needed her undivided attention for a few minutes and the only way I could think of to do that was by making a full confession.

"I'll talk," I said, when she came across. "But only to you."

I could see indecision in her face. It was not really a question of how intelligent the scissor-women were; they operated on agendas that were partially programmed, and partly opaque to the rest of us. Her voice came though the grill.

"I am activating the antiscribe," she said. "Speak."

"My name is Aletheria Tole. I am from Tharsis. I assumed another identity, which was implanted. I came here looking for my sister, who married

a woman from Caud many years ago. . . ."

I continued to speak, taking care to modulate the rhythm of my voice so that it became semi-hypnotic. The scissor-women had programming to avoid mind control, but this was something else entirely. As I spoke, I looked into her pale eyes and glimpsed her soul. I drew it out, as I had been taught so many years before on the Plains. It span across the air between us, a darkling glitter. The door was no barrier. I opened my mouth and sucked it in. It lay in my cheek like a lump of ice.

The scissor-woman's face grew slack and blank.

"Step away from the door," I said. She did so. I bent my head to the haunt-lock and released her soul. It fled into the lock, tracing its engrams through the circuit mechanisms, grateful to be free of me. The door swung open; I stepped through and struck the scissor-woman at the base of the skull. She crumpled without a sound. My own 'scribe was sitting on a shelf: they would have copied its contents. I snatched it up and ran through the maze of corridors.

Discovery was soon made. I heard a cry behind me, feet drumming on the ceiling above. I headed downward, reasoning that in these old buildings the best chance of escape lay in the catacombs below. When I reached what I judged to be the lowest level, I ducked into a chamber and flicked on the antiscribe as I ran. I could not get a signal for Winterstrike. But

then, turning the corner, I found the flayed warrior before me.

"Where, then?" I said aloud, not expecting her to respond, but once more the ghost beckoned. I followed the rust-red figure through the labyrinth, through tunnels swimming with unknown forms: women with the heads of coyu and aspiths, creatures that might have been men. I ignored the weir-wards, being careful not to touch them. Sometimes the warrior grew faint before me and I was beginning to suspect why this should be. I could hear no signs of pursuit, but that did not mean that none were following. The scissor-women could be deadly in their silence.

At last we came to a door and the warrior halted. In experiment, I closed down the 'scribe and she was no longer there. I put it on again, and she reappeared.

"You're no ghost," I said. She was speaking. There was still no sound,

but the words flickered across the screen.

She was not conversing. The words were lists of archived data, skeins of information. I had not been entirely correct. She was not the ghost of a warrior. She was the ghost of the library, the animated form of the cached archives that we had believed to be destroyed, and that the Caud matri-

archy, in their ignorance, had not bothered to find.

I knew what I had to do. I hastened past the warrior and pushed open the door, kicking and shoving until the ancient hinges gave way. I stumbled out into a frosty courtyard, before a frozen fountain. The mansion before me was dark, but something shrieked out of the shadows: a weirform, activated, of a woman with long teeth and trailing hair. She shot past my shoulder and disappeared. I heard an alarm sounding inside the house. But the 'scribe had a broadcasting signal again and that was all that mattered. I called through to Winterstrike, where it was already mid-morning, and downloaded everything into the matriarchy's data store, along with a message. The warrior's face did not change as she slowly vanished. When she was completely gone, I shut down the 'scribe and waited.

The scissor-women were not long in finding me. They took me back to Mote, to a different, smaller cell. I was not interrogated again. Later the next day, a stiff-faced cleric appeared in the doorway and announced that

I was free to go.

I walked out into a cold afternoon to find the streets thronged with people. There would be no war. The matriarchy had, in its wisdom, come to a compromise and averted catastrophe, or so the women of Caud said.

mouths twisting with the sourness of disbelief.

I wondered what Gennera had discovered in the library archives that had given Winterstrike such a lever. It would most likely be a weapon, and I wondered also what I had done, in handing the power over one city across to another, even though it was my own. For governments can change, so swiftly, and benevolence never lasts. But I caught a rider through the gates of Caud all the same, heading for one of the way-station towns of the Plain and then for Winterstrike, and did not look behind me. O



# HOME MOVIES

#### Mary Rosenblum

Mary Rosenblum, Mary Freeman in mystery, is a graduate of Clarion West, a Hugo nominee, and winner of the Asimov's Readers' Award. She has published eight novels, a collection of her short fiction, and more than sixty short stories. For more information, visit her website: <a href="https://www.maryrosenblum.com">www.maryrosenblum.com</a>. Mary's latest SF novel, Horizon, will be released from Tor sometime this year. In her latest tale, she reveals a dubious new way to experience vicarious thrills.

er broker's call woke Kayla from a dream of endless grass sprinkled with blue and white flowers. A fragment of client memory? Sometimes they seeped into her brain even though they weren't supposed to. She sat up, groggy with sleep, trying to remember if she'd ever visited one of the prairie preserves as herself. "Access," she said, yawned, and focused on the shimmer of the holo-field as it formed over her desktop.

"Usually, you're up by now." Azara, her broker, gave her a severe look from beneath a decorative veil, woven with shimmering fiber lights.

"I'm not working." Kayla stretched. "I can sleep late."

"You're working now." Azara sniffed. "Family wedding, week-long reunion, the client wants the whole affair, price is no object. Please cover yourself."

"Your religion is showing." But Kayla reached for the shift she'd shed last night, pulled it over her head. "A whole week?" She yawned again. "I don't know. I met this cool guy last night and I don't know if I want to be gone a whole week."

"If you want me as a broker you'll do it." Azara glared at her. "This client is the most picky woman I have had dealings with in many years. But she is paying a bonus and you are my only chameleon who matches her physical requirements." She clucked disapproval.

One of those. Kayla sighed and turned to the tiny kitchen wall. "Did you tell her it's not our age or what we look like or even our gender that makes us see what they want us to see?"

"Ah." Azara rolled her eyes. "I gave her the usual explanation. Several times." She stretched her very red lips into a wide smile. "But she was willing to pay for her eccentricities, so we will abide by them."

"She must be rich." Kayla spooned Sumatran green tea into a cup,

stuck it under the hot water dispenser. "How nice for her."
"Senior administrator of Mars Colony. Of course, rich, or would she call

me?" Azara snapped her fingers. "You have an appointment with her in two hours." She eyed Kayla critically, "Appearance matters to her."

"Don't worry." Kayla ran a hand through her tousled mop as she sipped

her tea. "I'll look good."

"Do so." And Azara's image winked out.

Kayla shook her head, but the client was always right . . . well, usually right . . . and they were willing to pay a lot to visit Earth vicariously from Mars or Europa or one of the micro-gravity habitats. She drank her tea, showered, and dressed in a green spider-silk shift she had bought on a visit to the orbital platforms. The color matched her eyes and brought out

the red in her hair. It did indeed make her look good.

Precisely two hours later, her desktop chimed with a link from Bradbury, the main city of Mars Colony, Kayla accepted, curious. She had rent-ed a couple of virtual tours of Mars Colony, had found the mostly underground cities to be as claustrophobic as the platforms, even though the domed space aboveground offered water and plants. The holo-field shimmered and a woman's torso appeared. Old. Euro-celtic phenotype, not gene-selected. Kayla appraised the woman's weathered face, wrinkles, determined eyes. Considering the current level of bio-science, very old to look like this. And very used to control. "Kayla O'Connor, at your service," she said and put a polite, welcoming smile onto her face.

The woman peered at her for a moment without speaking, nodded finally. "I am Jeruna Nesmith, First Administrator of Bradbury City. I would like to enjoy my nephew's son's wedding. It will take place on a small, private island, and include a week long family reunion." She seemed to lean forward, as if to stare into Kayla's eyes. "The broker I con-

tacted assured me that you would know what I want to look at."

Ah, yes, she was indeed used to control. Kayla smiled. "Only after we have talked and I have gotten to know you." Although she could guess right now what the old bitch would want to look at. "I am usually quite accurate about what interests my clients."

"So the broker says. I hope she is correct." Nesmith straightened. "I

have little time to waste, so let us begin."

So much for that cute young executive from Shanghai she'd met at the club last night. "As you wish." Kayla kept her smile in place, started to record. "I would like you to tell me about this wedding."

"Tell you what?"

"Everything." Kayla leaned back, her smart-chair stretching and conforming to cradle her. "Who is getting married? Why? Are they a good match? What do their parents think about it? What do you think about

it? Who would you be happy to see and who would you avoid at the wedding? What do you think about each of the relatives and guests that will be present?"

"What does all this have to do with recording images for me?" Ne-

smith's eyebrows rose. "This is not your business."

"And the recording I make of our conversation is destroyed as soon as the contract is completed . . . you did sign the contract," Kayla reminded her gently. "If you just want videos, it's much cheaper to hire a cameraman rather than a chameleon. But if you want me to look with your eyes, notice the details you would notice. . . ." She smiled. "Then I have to think like you."

Again, Nesmith stared at her. "The wedding is of one of my nephew's sons." She waved a long-fingered hand. "A worthless, spoiled boy, who will never make anything of himself, marrying an equally spoiled and self-centered girl from one of the big aquaculture families. It is a spectacle to

impress other inside families."

Well, she already knew how to look at the bride and groom. Kayla settled into listening mode as the woman continued. Notice the pointless extravagances, the follies, the proof of her pronouncements. Ah, but that wasn't all. . . . She let her eyelids droop, listening, paying attention to the emotional nuances of voice and expression as the woman droned on, inserting a leading question here and there. The old bitch did have an agenda. Interesting. Kayla absorbed every word, putting on this woman the way you'd put on a costume for a party.

She took the shot at her usual clinic, the morning her plane was scheduled to leave. An Yi, her favorite technician, administered it. "Where do you get to go this time?" she asked as she settled Kayla into the recliner

and checked her vitals on the readout. "Somewhere fun?"

"Fancy, anyway." Although something didn't quite add up and that bothered her a little. She went over the interview again as she told An Yi about the wedding and reunion. Nope. Couldn't put her finger on it. She watched the technician deftly clean the tiny port in her carotid and prepare the dose.

"Ah, it sounds so lovely," An Yi sighed as she began to inject the nano. "Maybe next year I'll do one of the island resorts. This year, I have to spend my vacation in Fouzhou. My father wants us all to be there for his one hundredth birthday." She made a face and laughed. "Maybe I should hire you to go."

"Why not?" Kayla said, and then the nano hit her and the walls

warped.

It always unsettled her as the nano-ware invaded her brain. The tiny machines disseminated quickly, forming a network, preempting the neural pathways of memory. It didn't take long, but as they established themselves, all her senses seemed to twist and change bright, and her stomach heaved with familiar nausea. An Yi had been doing this for a long time and had the pan ready for her, wiping her mouth afterward and placing a cool, wet cloth on her forehead. The headache hit Kayla like a thrown spear and she closed her eyes, concentrating on her breathing, waiting for it to be over.

When it finally faded An Yi helped her sit up and handed her a glass of apple juice laced with ginseng to drink. The tart sweetness of the juice and the familiar hitterness of the ginseng settled her stomach and the last echo of the headache vanished

"Do your clients mind getting sick when they get it?" An Yi asked curi-

"Probably," Kayla nodded, "But they can buy the option to translate the memories into their own long term memory if they choose. So they only have to put up with the side effects once." She stood, okay now. "I'd better get going I still have to finish packing"

"Have a really fun time." An Yi said, her expression envious.

"I'll do my best."

Kayla left the clinic and caught the monorail across town to pick up her luggage and head for the airport. She probably would enjoy it, she thought, even if the Martian Administrator's very poor opinion of most of her extended family was accurate. And then there was Ethan, Kayla smiled as she thumbed the charge plate and exited the monorail. Her client's hidden agenda. He was cute and clearly the old gal had a crush on him. So the week wouldn't be entirely wasted. She could flirt with him and Jeruna wouldn't mind at all.

Before she left her condo, she made her trip notes in her secret diary. You weren't supposed to record anything, but, hand-written in the little blank-paged paper book she'd found in a dusty junk stall at the market, it was safe enough. Those notes served as steppingstones across the gaping holes in her past. It was fun, sometimes, to compare the client's instructions with her own observations afterward. Client perspectives were rarely objective. If they were, they wouldn't need her.

The trip to the rent-an-island was tedious. The family had paid for a high level of security. It was necessary in this age of kidnap-as-career. The security checks and delays took time, since she traveled as an invited guest of a family member who had not planned the wedding. And, thus, was not paying the security firm. But this was nothing new, and she endured the familiar roadblocks stoically. Kidnap raids were real, and her client would have to suffer the delays, too, when she consumed the nano.

But once she boarded the private shuttle from Miami International, everything changed. Her invitation coin had been declared good, and all the perks were in place. The flight attendant offered fresh, tropical, organic fruit. Wine if she wanted it, Excellent tea, which she enjoyed, She was used to sleeping on planes, and so woke, refreshed, as the shuttle swooped down to land on the wedding island. She was the only passenger on this run, and, as the door unsealed and the rampway unfurled, she drew in a deep breath of humidity, flowers, rot, and soil. A vestigal memory stirred. Yes, she had been in a place like this . . . maybe this place . . . before. Funny how smell was the strongest link to the fragments of past jobs that had seeped past the nano. She descended the rampway to the small landing, and headed for the pink stucco buildings of the tiny airport terminal, figuring she'd find some kind of shuttle service. Flowering vines covered the walls and spilled out over the tiled entryway and the scent

evoked another twinge of been here memory. As she paused, a tall figure

stepped from the doorway.

"You must be Jeruna's guest." He smiled at her, his posture a bit wary, dressed in a loose-weave linen shirt and shorts. "Im Ethan." He offered his hand. "I belong to the ne'er-do-well branch of the family so I get to play chauffeur for the occasion. Welcome to the wedding of the decade." He said it lightly, but his hazel eyes were reserved.

"Nice to meet you, Ethan." Kayla returned his firm handshake, decided he was as cute as the vids she'd looked at, and let him take her bag. Tossing her hair back from her face, she smiled as she studied him. Why you? she wondered as she followed him through the tiled courtyard of the private airport, past a shallow, marble fountain full of leaping water and golden fish. "I'm looking forward to being a guest here," she said as they reached the roadway outside.

"Really?" He turned to face her, his hand on the small electric cart parked outside. "This is a job to you, right? Can you really let yourself enjoy something like this? Won't your thoughts about it mess up what

vou're recording?"

Great. Kayla sighed. "So who leaked it? That I'm a chameleon?"

"Is that what you call yourself?" He stowed her luggage, which had been delivered by a uniformed baggage handler, in the rear cargo space of the cart. "Doesn't it weird you out? That you're going to hand over your

thoughts and feelings to somebody . . . for pay?"

He wasn't being hostile, as so many were. He was really asking. "The nano can't record thoughts." Kayla smiled as she climbed into the cart's passenger seat, inwardly more than a little ticked off. It made her job harder when they knew. Now she wouldn't get really good reactions until he got used to her, forgot she was recording. And a lot of times, in the really good moments, some family member who had had too much to drink would remember and say something. She sighed. "The nano only records sensory input...vision, hearing, taste, touch, smell. That's it. We harven't developed telepathy yet. Your great great aunt... or whatever she is... gets to experience the event with all of her senses, not just vision and hearing."

"Oh." Ethan climbed in beside her, his face thoughtful. "Isn't it kind of

weird, though? Hanging out with strangers all the time?"

"Not really." She lifted her hair off her neck as the cart surged forward, enjoying the breeze of their motion in the heavy, humid afternoon. Well, he had never lived outside, probably couldn't see beyond the luxury of an inside lifestyle. "That's what I do . . . learn about the family, get a sense of what the client is really interested in so I can participate the way my client would, if she was here." She smiled at him. "I really do feel like a member of the family or the group while I'm there. That's what makes me good at this."

"A chameleon." But he smiled as he said it. "What about your family?

Does it change how you feel about them?"

"I never had one." She shrugged. "I was a London orphan when Irish looks weren't the fad. Did the foster home slash institution thing."

"I'm sorry."

She shrugged again, tired of the topic years ago, and not sure how they'd gotten here. She didn't talk about herself on a job. "So how come you rate the job of chauffeur?" She smiled at him. "Just how ne'er do well

was your family branch?"

"Oh, they were all off-off-Broadway actors, musicians, failed writers, the usual wastrel thing . . . according to our family's creed." He laughed, not at all defensive. "The family bails us out before we disgrace anyone, but they make sure we know our place." He shrugged, gave her a sideways look. "I play jazz, myself. Among other things my family disapproves of. But I don't do illegal drugs, murder, mayhem, or anything else too awful, so I got a genuine invitation to this bash."

"To be a chauffeur."

"Well, yeah." He grinned, his hazel eyes sparkling. "But they have to make sure I know my place."

"Does that bother you?" She asked it because she was curious.

"No.

He meant it. She watched his face for her client. She would resent it,

Kayla thought. Which was the better reaction?

They had arrived at the resort complex. More pink stucco. Lots of lanais on the sprawling buildings, carefully coiffed tropical plantings to make the multitude of cottages look private and isolated, pristine blue pools land-scaped to look like natural features with waterfalls, and basking areas studded with umbrellas, chaise lounges, and bars. He drove her to the loby entrance and she checked in, noticing that he hovered at her shoulder.

The staff wouldn't let her do a thing, of course. Two very attractive young men with Polynesian faces, wearing colorful island-print wraps around their waists, snatched up all her luggage and led the way to her own cottage with palms to shade it and a glimpse of white sand and bluesea horizon. Kayla smiled to herself at the location of the cottage as she offered a tip and received twin, polite refusals. Not a front row seat to the ocean view . . . that went to major family guests. But she could still see the water through the palm trunks and frangipani. A little. And the furnishings were high-end. Lacquered bamboo and glass, with flowered cotton upholstery . . . the real fiber, not a synthetic.

A knock at the door heralded another attendant pushing a cart with champagne, glasses, and a tray of snacks. Puu-puu. The word surfaced, unbidden. Snacks. What language? Kayla tried to snag it, but the connection wasn't there. Two glasses. "Will you join me?" she asked Ethan. She smiled at the young man with the cart, who smiled back, his dark eyes on hers, set out plates and food on the low table in front of the silk-upholstered settee, uncorked the champagne with a flourish, and filled two flutes. Handed her one with a bow, and his fingertips brushed hers.

Full service, she thought, met his eyes, smiled, did the tiny head shake he'd recognize, and handed the other glass to Ethan as the attendant left. "I take one sip," she said. "That's all. Blurs perception. Here's to a lovely

place and time. "

"What a drag. But you're right about place and time." He touched the rim of his glass to hers and they chimed crystal. Of course. "Tell me what my great great aunt or whatever wants to see."

You, she thought, lifted the glass to him silently, took her sip. "The family The ceremony How everyone takes it."

"You're not telling me."

"Nope." She grinned. "Of course not."

"Sorry." He laughed and sipped his own wine. "I shouldn't have asked." He sat on the settee, his expression contemplative. "It's just that she's such a . . . I don't know . . . renegade. But she got away with it." He grinned. "She just went out and conquered her own planet." He laughed. "She's a successful renegade. Unlike us, who never made it pay. I just can't believe that she really cares about this society wedding, you know?"

She didn't. Not really. Kayla leaned back on the settee next to him, stretching travel-kinks from her muscles, her eyes on Ethan, examining him from head to toe as if he was her new lover. "So have you ever met

her?"

"Jeruna?" Ethan shrugged. "Nah. I don't think she ever came back here,

after she left for Mars. And that was before I was born."

Interesting. So what did he represent? Kayla took her time, enjoying the view. He was cuter than the vids. And not the spoiled rich kid she'd expected. Too bad. She souelched a brief pang of "what if"

He flinched, fumbled a cell out of his pocket. "Uh oh. Another arrival to ferry." He stood, set his half-full flute down on the table. "I was going to ask you if you wanted to skip out on the big family dinner tonight. Eat

down on the beach." His eyes met hers. "But I bet you can't."

"No, I can't." She made her voice regretful, which really wasn't a stretch. "Want to help me out?" Because his tone suggested he planned to skip it. "Sit by me? Give me a few clues? I'd like to give the old gal her money's worth."

He hesitated, then shrugged, Wrinkled his nose, "For you, I'll suffer," He

laughed. "And now you owe me."

"Ökay, I do." She laughed with him, caught his lean, athletic profile as he turned to leave, promising to meet her there at the appointed dinner hour. So what does he mean to you? she asked her client silently. Something, that was for sure. Her services were not cheap.

The prenuptial dinner offered excellent food, elegant wine, and the usual boring and self centered conversations. Obviously the leak had made the rounds. But after the open bar, pre-dinner, and the first round of wine with the appetizers, everyone loosened up and forgot about her. This family ran to whiners. Kayla got tired of high-pitched nasal complaints quickly. The assiduous wine-servers didn't help matters, filling glasses the moment the level fell beneath the rim. She had tipped the maitre d' to fill her glass with a non-alcoholic version of the whites and reds but it seemed that everyone else was happy with the real stuff.

Ethan sipped at his glass but didn't drink much, toying with his food. Leaning close to her, he murmured wry summaries of various family members that required her to invoke all her self control in order to keep

from sputtering laughter into her glass.

"You're going to get me in trouble," she murmured, giving him a sideways glance. "Not from great-aunt-whatever, I'll wager." He winked at her. "She never thought much of the whole bunch of us." He drank some of the cabernet the server had just poured to accompany the rack of lamb being dramatically carved and served. "I still wonder that she would do this. You... chameleons, as you call yourselves... are supposed to be highly empathetic to your clients." He arched an eyebrow. "Can't you tell me? Why she wants this?"

"I really don't know." Which was the truth. That was what had been bothering her, she realized. "Usually I can figure it out, but not this time." She lifted her glass. Smiled into his eyes, catching a full front view with just the right shadows and highlights. "I suspect your . . . commentary . . . .

will really delight her."

"I hope so." He touched the rim of his glass to hers, a smile glimmering in his eyes. "I like her style."

The interminable dinner wound to its appointed end. Ethan wanted to make love to her. She could feel it. She wanted him to, she realized with a twinge of regret that centered between her less.

Jeruna Nesmith looked over their shoulders

And . . . in a handful of days . . . she would relinquish the nano to An Yi's filters, deliver it to her client and . . . all memory of Ethan would be gone. Oh, maybe a glimpse of hazel eyes on some sultry summer afternoon would touch a chord, and she'd wonder idly where that memory had come from. She'd have his name in her diary—but only as a big question. Why him?

She said good night to him at the door of her cottage and they looked into each other's eyes across a gulf as vast as the damn sea. She turned away first, banging the door closed behind her, not caring that Ms. Nesmith would get to remember this, stalked across the expensive, elegant, lovely room to the wet bar, poured herself a double shot of very expensive brandy, downed it and went to bed.

The wedding was everything it promised to be. Lots of wealthy people, lots of expensive, designer clothing, lots of show, pomp, circumstance, flowers, fine food, expensive booze. . . She had dressed to blend in, in a long sari-styled dress of silk voile, but felt a moment of panic as she entered the huge chapel with the red velvet carpet down the aisle, the ropes of tropical flowers draping the pews. Ethan wasn't here, and her client might well read between the lines . . . or glimpses . . . and guess that the silent end of last night might have something to do with it.

But then she spotted him way down the aisle on the groom's side. Very formal and erect. Caught a good three-quarter shot of him, oblivious, his expression closed and unreadable. Then, as if he had felt the touch of her eyes, he looked directly at her. He didn't smile, but his eyes caught hers and for a few moments, her client ceased to exist. Kayla shook herself, gave him a small, rueful smile, and seated herself on the bride's side of

the aisle, where she'd have a good view of him.

The ceremony was very traditional and she did the high points: the procession, the vows, ring, all that stuff. But she kept cutting back to Ethan's three-quarter profile. He might as well have been carved out of acrylic. But she kept looking over at him, giving the old girl what she'd paid for.

Home Movies 13°

The ceremony ended and everybody milled about, trickling eventually to the reception. She didn't see Ethan, circulated through the crowd, noticing the family details that her client would want to see—the little tiffs, the sniping, the white-knuckled grasp on the martini glass. Oh yes, Kayla thought as she did the glazed-eyes look and really saw. I know what you think of these people and what you would notice if you were really here. Ethan was right. She really didn't think much of any of them. Except him.

Ethan was nowhere to be seen.

She took a table with a good pan-view of the garden where the reception had been laid out. Palms cast thin shade and bowers fragrant with flowering vines offered private nooks. Long buffet tables, decorated with ice sculptures and piles of tropical fruit and flowers, offered fresh seafood, fruit, elegant bites of elegant food, and an open bar. The towering wedding cake occupied its own flower-roped table flanked by champagne buckets and trays of flutes. The sun stung her face and she turned her back to it, and there was Ethan, seating an elderly guest.

So she was looking right at it when the little jump jet roared in low over the grounds just beyond him. It hovered, landed straight down, engines whining. Figures in camo leaped from it, masked and armed with automatic weapons. One fired a short burst into the palms, shredding the leaves. "Down." An amplified voice bellowed. "Everybody down, now!"

Oh, crap. A kidnap raid.

Women shrieked, voices rose, and, for a frozen instant, chaos reigned. One of the camoed figures fired a small handgun and a waiter clapped a hand to his neck as the stun dart hit, and fell. Shredded bits of palm drifted down onto his white-clad sprawl. The first of the guests began to lie down on the grass and it was as if a potent gas had swept the garden as everyone went prone. Kayla had already flattened herself on the grass, her eyes fixed on Ethan, who still stood. Don't be a hero, she thought, willing him to lie down, because they wouldn't want him. What had happened to the security force? One of the raiders showed a waiter and Ethan stepped forward. No, Kayla shrieked silently as the raider swung his rifle butt and flattened Ethan. Kayle tensed, her eyes on his limp body, straining to see movement.

"Nobody moves, nobody gets hurt," the loudspeaker blared. Australian accent, Kayla noticed. A lot of the professional kidnap-for-hire gangs were Aussie. The top ones. From the corner of her eye she saw the figures striding through the guests, snatching a necklace here or a watch there, but not really looting. They were looking for someone specific. That's where the money lay. They'd take that person and leave.

A hand closed on her arm and yanked her to her feet as if she weighed nothing. Breathless, her heart pounding, Kayla stared into cold gray eyes

behind a green face mask. "Move," the man said.

"You made a mistake. I'm not . . . " Kayla broke off with a gasp as he whipped her arm behind her and pain knifed through her. She stumbled along, losing her balance, as he shoved her forward. "I'm not anyone," she gasped, but he only twisted her arm higher, so that tears gathered in her eyes and the pain choked her. More hands grabbed her, someone slapped

a drug patch against her throat and blackness began to seep into her vision. The sky wheeled past and a fading part of her mind whispered that they were loading her onto the jet.

Then ... nothing.

She woke to a headache and thought for a moment she had just gotten a dose. Then the oppressive humidity and the thick scent of tropics brought her back to the island, the kidnappers' assault. She sat up, eyes wide, straining to see in utter darkness. Blind? Had that drug the kidnappers had given her interacted with the nano? Blinded her?

"It's all right. I'm here."

Familiar voice, familiar arms around her. "Ethan?" Her voice shook and she leaned against him as he pulled her close. She could make him out... just harely. She wasn't blind. "Where are we? What happened?"

"A great big mistake happened." Ethan laughed a harsh note. "It was a kidnap by the Yellow Roo clan. I recognized the uniforms. They've hit the family before Business as usual when you get to the right income bracket."

"I know, but . . . why me?" Kayla swallowed. She felt a mattress beneath her, made out walls, a couple of plastic bins, a porta-potty. "I'm not part of your family."

"And I might as well not be." Ethan let his breath out in a long sigh. "That's the mistake. The fools grabbed maybe the only two individuals in the entire damn reception who can't make a decent ransom. Or can you?"

"Oh, gods, I wouldn't be a chameleon if I had money." Kayla closed her eyes, her head pounding. "They can go look. There's not enough in my account to make it worth their while." She shivered because kidnap was an accepted career choice and the rules were very civilized . . . unless you really couldn't pay. Then they were not civilized at all.

Ethan stroked the hair back from her face, "Maybe Jeruna will pay for

you," he said.

She shook her head. No, she was a chameleon because she could read people. Jeruna Nesmith was not going to pay ransom on a paid contractor.

"Well, we'd better start making plans." Ethan did that harsh laugh again. "I've got no better ransom prospects than you do."

"You're family. Inside."

"Yeah, and some kidnap clan grabbed my older brother back when I was a baby. I think he was maybe seven. The family didn't pay up. Their

attitude was "you want to walk your own path, do it."

Kayla didn't ask him what happened to his brother. She heard that answer in the razored edge of his tone. She scanned the walls. They were in some kind of crude hut. Dawn must be close because she could make out slender poles woven into walls. Sheet plastic made up the roof, stiff stuff... she tried it. Fastened securely to the top pole of the walls. A door of chain link fit neatly into its metal-rimmed frame and was chained shut. But...

"They really don't expect us to try too hard." Kayla murmured the words like a lover's breath into Ethan's ear. Because they were probably

listening.

"Of course not. This is just a place to wait out negotiations. You don't try to escape. It's usually safer to stay put. That's how the game works."

"Look there." Kayla pointed. "See how wide?" she whispered. "We could get through there. Maybe. The poles are thin and we could probably priem out. Then the gap between those big ones might be just wide enough."

Ethan was at the wall before she finished speaking. She joined him and grabbed one of the slender poles. In unison, they pulled on it. Felt it give. Not much... just a hair. He changed position, his hands next to hers and they pulled together. Got a centimeter or two of give this time. Did it again. And again. By the time they worked the two slender poles free, the pole was slippery with blood from their hands. Kayla helped Ethan lay them on the floor and wiped her hands on her torn dress. The gap was narrow... a couple of handwidths. But she was skinny. She pulled the long hem of her skirt up between her legs, tied it to form a crude pair of shorts. Then she turned to Ethan, took his face in her hands, kissed him. Hard. "Wish me luck." she said.

"Honey, we're both in on this." He kissed her back, fiercely.

"No." She pushed him away. "You need to stay here."

"I told you ... "

"She wanted you." Kayla gripped his arms, willing him to understand.
"I'm not supposed to tell you this, but there it is. That's why she hired me.
To look at you at the wedding."

"Jeruna?" He looked stunned. "Why the hell would she care? She was

already on Mars when I was born. I'm barely related to her."

Thave no idea." Kayla turned away. "But she does. She'll pay your ransom. I guarantee it. So you're safe." She let go of him, pushing him away from her, threw one leg over the lower pole. The two thick poles that framed the gap squeezed her, pressing on her spine and breast bone, squeezing her lungs so that she fought suffocation panic as she squirmed her body through the gap, her thin dress shredding, rough bark scraping skin. Fell to the dry ground on the other side, bruising her hip and scraping her knee. Scrambled to her feet.

"Hold it." Ethan leaned through after her. "The bins are full of water and food. I checked while you were out. Wait a minute and I'll hand some stuff through. They don't blant these drop boxes close to anything civi-

lized. Might be a long hike."

He disappeared and a few moments later began to hand bottles of water through the gap. Too many to carry. "That's plenty," Kayla said, and took the bags of something dry and leathery he handed down. As she retied her skirt to hold the food and as much of the water as she could carry, she glanced up to see Ethan squirming through the opening after her. "No," she said, heard him gasp, stuck, and suddenly he popped through, falling hard onto the ground in front of her.

"You idiot," she said, holding out her hand to help him up.

"If you're right about Jeruna, I probably am." He scrambled to his feet and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "I'm not going to sit there and wait to find out if you are or not." He grabbed her hand. "And besides, I'll worry about you out here. Let's go."

The sky had lightened just enough so that she could make out the tall trees and tangle of underbrush. Behind them, their prison seemed to be nothing more than a box built of the woven poles, hidden from the sky by

the tall trees. Soaring trunks surrounded them, black against the feeble light. Huge, fern-like leaves brushed her and a million tiny voices creaked, croaked, buzzed, and burbled. Kayla started as something feathery brushed her cheek, her heart sinking. Jungle? The thick air and dense growth woke a slow sense of claustrophobia. "Sweet." She looked up at distant patches of gray sky. "Where are we?" A thunderous howling suddenly split the graying dawn and Kayla whirled, heart pounding, searching the twined branches overhead for something, anything as the sound crescendoed.

"That answers your question. It's okay. Those are howler monkeys." Ethan actually laughed as he wiped hair out of his eyes. "They only live in the Amazon Preserve. I thought that might be where we were. It smelled

right."

"How nice. Glad you're enjoying it." Kayla tried to remember details about the preserve. Big. Very big. Something bit her and she flinched, slapped at it. In the trees above them, sinuous black shapes leaped in a torrent from tree to tree. Leaves and twigs showered down in their wake. The howler monkeys? She wanted to cover her ears. "I guess we just walk," she said, "and hope we find a road or something."

"Oh, there are plenty of roads. It's a giant eco-laboratory. It's just not real likely that anyone will be on them. Permits to work here are hard to come by." Ethan took off his shirt, began to tie the sleeves together. "We'd

better bring all the water we can."

Something small and brown buzzed down to land on his bare shoulder. He yelped and slapped it, leaving a smear of blood and squashed bug.

"Better wear your shirt." Kayla unknotted her skirt. "I have lots of extra cloth here." It was not easy to tear the fabric without a knife, but they finally managed to fashion a sling for the water and food. By the time Ethan shouldered it, a lot of biting things had dined on them. Jeruna was going to get far more than she paid for, Kayla thought grimly as they started off

They pushed aside the ferns, clambering over the thick vines and low plants that covered the ground in the dim light. The humid heat wrapped them like a blanket and Kayla struggled with a sense of drowning as she fought her way through the tangle in Ethan's wake. Her dress sandals didn't do much to protect her feet, but they were better than nothing. Before long, however, she was trying not to limp.

It never really got light. In the yellow-green twilight, flying things bit or buzzed. Kayla leaped back as a looped vine turned out to be a brown

and copper banded snake.

"Common Lancehead," Ethan said, guiding her warily past it. "Pretty poisonous. We mostly need to watch out for the ground dwellers. They're harder to spot. The South American Coral snake is the worst, but you can see it. Usually. The Bushmaster is hard to spot . . . it blends right in." He gave her a crooked smile. "That's why I've been going first. I'm partially desensitized to both. If they bite me, I probably won't die." "Gods, what do you do?" Kayla eyed the ground warily. "I thought you

said you played jazz. What are you? A snake charmer?"

"I do play jazz. And I have a Ph.D. in Tropical Ecology." Ethan

shrugged. "Totally useless degree, according to the family, but I spend a lot of time here."

They didn't see any more snakes, although Kayla kept nervous eyes on every shadow. The going got easier when they stumbled onto a game trail, a narrow track that wound between the trunks and beneath the thick vines. The damp heat seemed to suck moisture from Kayla's body, and, in spite of frequent sips of precious water, thirst began to torment her. Now and again they stopped and Kayla strained her ears, heard nothing but the constant hum of insects, the occasional shriek of birds or monkeys, and once a deep cough that made Ethan narrow his eyes. "Jaguar," he said. He gave her a strained smile. "They pick the place for their boxes on purpose. Make it worth your while to stay put."

"You should have." She wiped sweat from her face with her filthy skirt.

"She really will pay for you."

"You want to hike through here on your own?" He grinned at her, then his smile faded. "Besides... I just wasn't going to sit there. I think that's partly why my father went off to be an artist and be poor. He could have been an artist and stayed rich and inside the family. But he didn't like the rules. And yeah, there are rules." He looked up as the light dimmed sud-

denly. "I think it's going to rain."

No kidding. Kayla's eyes widened as the patches of sky visible through the canopy went from blue to charcoal gray in minutes. Without warning, the clouds opened and water fell, straight as a shower. Ethan caught her wrist and pulled her into a natural shelter created by a tree that had partly fallen and had been covered in vines. The thick leaves blocked most of the downpour. Kayla licked the sweet drops of water from her lips, laughed, and stepped out into the downpour again, wet almost instantly to the skin. It felt good as the warm rain sluiced away sweat and dirt. She slid the top of her dress down her shoulders, the water cascading between her breasts. Felt damn near clean. The rain stopped, just as suddenly as it had begun.

The sun emerged above the canopy and the air turned instantly into a sauna. Water dripped, flashing like jewels in the shafts of yellow light that speared down through the leaves, and a bright bird with crimson and blue feathers fluttered between the trees. Kayla laughed softly, her wet hair plastered to her head, her dress still around her waist. "It's beautiful," she said. "It's a hell of a place to hike, but it's beautiful." She turned to look at him and deliberately stepped out of her dress. Jeruna be damned. She was on another planet. Kayla spread the dress over some branches to dry.

Without a word, Ethan stripped palmlike fronds from a low growing clump, spread them on the sheltered space beneath the mat of lianas. A tiny monkey with a clown-face of perpetual surprise chattered at him from a tree trunk, then dashed upward to vanish in the shadows. He turned to face her, still without speaking, took her hands in his and

pulled her to him, his hands light on her shoulders.

All of a sudden the cuts, bruises, the steamy heat . . . none of it mattered. She leaned forward, let her lips brush his, traced their outline with her tongue. Felt him shudder. He pulled her roughly against him, his mouth on hers, hard, fierce, hungry as her own.

They made love, drowsed, and made love again. He told her about the

universe of the very wealthy and what it was like to live on the edge, not really inside, but not really allowed to be entirely independent either. Family was family . . . , you were a commodity in a way as much as a tribe. But he was still inside. She told him about growing up in a crèche. Outside. Finding out that she had a strong empathy rating, that she had the talent to be a chameleon.

"Is that why you do it?" He leaned on his elbow beside her, his fingertips tracing the curve of her cheekbone. "So you can get to live inside?"

"Yes." She gave him truth because she found she didn't want to lie to this man. "I do want it. And it pays well." She yelped as something bit her. "Damn bugs." She sat up, slapped, and glared at the blood on her palm. "Maybe we'd better walk some more? You might be wrong about them coming back." But she winced and nearly fell as she tried to stand.

Ethan sucked in a quick breath as he examined her feet. "Kayla, why

didn't you say something? Sit down and let me look."

"There wasn't any point in complaining," she said, but she couldn't bite back a cry as he used a torn sleeve from his dress shirt to wipe the mud from her feet. Blood streaked the fabric and the cuts smarted and stung.

"We can tear up my shirt, at least wrap them before we start walking again. I'm sorry. I just didn't think about you wearing sandals." He stroked the tops of her feet gently. "You know, I'm chipped." He laughed, a note of bitterness in his voice. "If they bothered to look."

"Chipped?" She pushed her damp hair back from her face.

"Tve got a GPS locater embedded in me. From birth. It's a family rule. If they looked for it, they'd find us."

"Why wouldn't they look?"

"Kidnappers use a masking device. It was probably on top of the box. Everybody plays by the rules, so they'll wait to hear from the kidnappers, give their answer. They won't go look." He frowned, looked back the way they had come. "You know, as efficiently as they did the raid, I can't believe they blew the snatch. Those guys do their homework. They should have been able to pick out their targets in the middle of the night, on the run." He shook his head, sighed. "So you might be right and they don't play by the rules either." He gave her a crooked smile. "We'd better go."

He managed to tear the real-cotton fabric of his shirt into rough strips and bandaged her feet so that she could still wear the flimsy sandals. She still limped, the tiny cuts and tears painful now that her first rush of escape adrenaline had faded. Slowly, laboriously, they made their way along the game trail, following it generally toward the setting sun as it wound through the neverending tangle of leaves, vines, and soaring trunks.

The light faded quickly as the sun sank and they finally stopped for the might, finding another sheltered spot beneath an old, dead tree trunk draped with vines. Sure enough, it rained not long after the last hint of light faded. Shielded from the worst of the brief downpour, they drank some more water and ate what turned out to be dried mango and papaya. And made love again.

Terror stalked the night. It wore no form but made sounds. Grunts, whistles, a coughing roar that had to be a jaguar. Ethan identified each sound. each detail of what was going on in the thick, rot-smelling dark. as

if he had a magic flashlight to pierce the night. He banished the terror and Kayla heard the love in his voice as he turned night into day. She almost laughed. Rabbit in a briar patch. It might have been a fun hike, if she'd had a good pair of shoes. At some point she drowsed, woke, felt Ethan's slack, sleeping arms still around her, drowsed again because Ethan knew that nothing would eat them. And that was good enough.

She woke, stiff, her stomach cramping with hunger in spite of last night's dried fruit as the dark tree trunks and fan-shaped leaves of the plants sheltering them took shape from the lightening dark. Ethan slept beside her and she looked down on him, barely visible in the hint of dawn. His face was flushed, and when she touched his skin it was hot. Feverish. I will not remember you, she thought, and a pang of grief pierced her. If a chameleon withheld the nano, that chameleon lost the union seal. You didn't spend a fortune to have your hired pair of eyes and ears walk away with the memory you wanted or hold it for ransom. That union seal that she had paid dearly to obtain meant that she was entirely trustworthy. If she violated that trust only once, she lost it forever.

And it wouldn't help. The nano self-destructed in a measured length of time if not filtered and stabilized. In a handful of days, the memory would evaporate, whether she handed it over to Jeruna or not. Of course, in a handful of days, she might still be here. She smiled mirthlessly into the faint gray of dawn, Maybe she should hope they didn't find their way out

of here. At least not soon.

She didn't kid herself about after. The wall between inside and outside was impenetrable. You could slip through it for awhile. But not for long. Rules. No forever after with Ethan. She let her breath out in a long, slow sigh, wishing she had said no to Jeruna, wishing that her broker had found her another contract. She ran her fingers along the curve of Ethan's cheekbone, watched his eyelids flutter, his golden eyes focus on her, watched his lips curve into a tender smile of recognition.

No, she didn't wish it. She leaned over him, met his lips halfway.

They reached the red-dirt track in the heat of noon, clawing through what seemed to be an impenetrable wall of leaves and vines out into hot sun that made them blink and stumble. For a few moments, they could only stand still, clutching each other, squinting in the sun. Then Ethan whooped, scooped her into his arms and they both tumbled into the dust,

weak with hunger and thirst, laughing like idiots.

The little electric jeep came around the curve in the little track a few moments later and the dark-skinned driver in jungle camo hit the brakes. He spoke Central-American Spanish, but so did Ethan and he translated. Their rescuer was a ranger in the Preserve and just happened to be checking this sector this morning. He made it clear that they were lucky, that he only came this way very occasionally, and clucked and shook his head as Ethan explained what had happened. It offended him, he told them, that the kidnap gangs used the rainforest for their boxes. It made it sometimes dangerous for the rangers. He had water with him and a lunch of bean and corn stew that he shared with them, and then he drove them four hours back to his headquarters.

The family machinery had leaped into action by the time they arrived, never mind that Ethan was a marginal member. A jump jet with medics on board met them and they were examined, treated for their minor injuries, dressed, and loaded before Kayla could catch her breath.

"They're taking us to the family hospital for observation and treatment," Ethan said as he settled into the plush seat beside Kayla. "My uncle sent them to get us." He touched her hand, his hazel eyes dark in the cabin's light. "We'll probably be separated for a bit. Kayla..." He broke off drew a breath. "I don't want you to forget... this."

"I can't help it." She struggled to keep her voice calm.

"Yes, you can. Keep it. Assimilate it, like your clients do." He gripped her arms, his face pale. "They can't stop you from doing that."

She shook her head. "I'm immunized," she whispered, "The nano won't

release to me. I can't assimilate it."

"How can you do this?" He was angry suddenly, his eyes blazing. "How can you just . . . walk away from part of your life? How can you just throw away your past?"

The past had teeth. It was something to run away from, not to cherish.

Up until now. She turned her head away from the accusation in his eyes.
"If I knock on your door, I'll be a stranger. None of this will have happened. I could be anybody."

"Maybe," she whispered, "I don't know."

"I want you to remember this."

She looked at him, met his eyes, realized that besides the anger she saw...fear."I can't." she said, because she would only give him the truth.

For a few moments he said nothing, then he looked away. "Will you ... give this to Jeruna?" he asked hoarsely.

She would only give him truth, so she said nothing. If she did not ...

He wrenched himself to his feet, his face averted, "Whore," he said, and

stalked to the rear of the plane.

For a long time she sat still, staring down at her scratched and scabbed hands, her bandaged and sanitized feet throbbing beneath the cotton hospital pants the medics had given her to wear.

In a handful of days, she wouldn't remember that he had said that, ei-

ther.

She hoped she would see him again. They kept her overnight, did enhanced healing to mend the damage to her feet, returned her luggage from the wedding resort, and offered her a ride home in a family jet. Just before she was due to leave, a knock at the door of her very plush private room made her heart leap, but it was simply a family lawyer, who handed her a very large check and a waiver for her to sign, absolving the family from legal blame.

She signed it. It had not been their fault that the kidnappers were so

inexplicably incompetent.

A slow anger had been building in her and she pressed her lips together as the lawyer bowed very slightly to her and retreated. A silent attendant arrived to carry her luggage to the private jet and she followed slow-

ly her newly healed feet still a bit tender in the flat sandals she wore. She climbed the carpeted stairs to the jet's entry and turned to look back at the private hospital grounds. It had the look of a gated residential community with cottages, walking paths, and gardens. The main building might have been a vacation lodge. The few uniformed staff on the paths ignored her and the old man in a smart-chair out for a breath of air never looked her way.

She hoarded and the jet door sealed behind her

She ignored her broker's insistent emails as long as she could. When she finally lifted the block. Azara's image appeared instantly in the holofield, her dark eyes snapping with anger, her beaded veil quivering as she faced Kayla, "What in the name of Allah's demons are you doing? The client has threatened me with legal action. As you know the contract protects me, but I am threatening you. And not with legal action, you spoiled child. No chameleon of mine has ever stolen the product. You had better not be the first, do you hear me?"

A part of Kayla's mind marveled at her rage. She had never seen Azara show even mild annoyance before. "I want to speak with her," she said.

"I will not play games with you. You will go immediately to the clinic." Azara snapped. "I spoke with your technician. She tells me you have only twenty-four hours until the nanos degrade. That is barely enough time to filter them and secure a digital copy for transmission."

Ah, bless you, An Yi, Kayla thought, She had begged, but An Yi had not promised. "It is more than enough time. I will go straight to the clinic." Kayla bowed her head, "As soon as I speak with Jeruna Nesmith."

Azara narrowed her eyes and her image froze. She was multitasking. clearly contacting Jeruna, on Mars. "She is willing to speak to you." She looked slightly puzzled. Apparently Jeruna's response had surprised her. "If you fulfill this contract, I may give you one more chance . . . if I never see such childish behavior from you again. But of course . . . you had a trying time." She regarded Kayla narrowly, "Our client does not blame you." She raised her evebrows, as if waiting for Kayla to comment. Shrugged. "I will not hold this lapse against you if she is satisfied."

Timing is everything. Kayla stood up, "I'll email An Yi and make sure

she can filter me.

"She is expecting you." Azara's red lips curved into a slight smile. "Do not disappoint me, girl."

The threat behind those words went beyond loss of her union seal, Kayla bowed her head once more and blanked the holo-field.

Ethan had not contacted her.

She had not really expected that he would. His final word hung in the air like the bitter taint of something burned. She waited as the holo-field

shimmered, making the distant connection to Bradbury.

Jeruna Nesmith's aged face shimmered to life in the field. Her expression gave nothing away, but a hint of triumph glimmered deep in her eyes. "I was sorry to hear that you were traumatized," she said smoothly. "Is that not a boon of the science? Even terror can be eliminated by an hour spent with the filters."

"You sent the kidnappers." Kayla sat calmly in her chair, her eyes on the woman's withered face. "You had them take me. And Ethan." Her voice trembled just a hair as she said his name and she watched Jeruna's eyes narrow. The triumph intensified. "Why?" She tilted her head. "Why spend all that money? Why play that game?"
"You are very intelligent." The old woman's thin lips curved into a sat-

isfied smile. "How did you figure it out?"

"Kidnappers aren't that incompetent. Not if they're snatching insiders." She shrugged. "You forget. I read people. They weren't at all unsure about who they had. They knew they had the right people. And that ranger happened by so conveniently. He was tracking us, wasn't he?"

Jeruna was smiling openly now. "Are you pregnant?"

Kayla swallowed, feeling as if she had been punched in the stomach. "No," she said. Pressed her lips together. "Is that what you were after?"

"No." Jeruna sighed. "But it would have been an . . . added bonus."

"Why did you do this?" She dared not raise her voice beyond a whisper. "To atone for my sins." Jeruna shook her head. "Hard as it may be for you to imagine, I was young once. And rather attractive. And smart." She smiled. "One of my distant relatives fell in love with me. He loved my mind as well as my body."

"Ethan's father," Kayla said.

"Oh, no, sweetheart, you flatter me." Jeruna cackled. "His grandfather. But I was hot to leave the planet and he was not and I believed that love was something that would wait until I had time for it." She eyed Kayla, her smile thin. "Never make that mistake, child. I now believe that the universe gives you one chance only."

No! Kayla swallowed the syllable before it could erupt. Kept her face expressionless. "So you wanted what? A memory to replace what never

happened?"

"Something like that." Jeruna's smile widened slowly, her eyes hungry, "And, I suspect, you have brought me the past I was not smart enough to live. I will be forever in your debt for that. Believe me, I will pay you very very well." Her smile broadened, a hint of satisfied dismissal glazing her eyes. "A very generous bonus. To pay for your trauma."

Whore, he had called her.

"Azara was wrong." Kayla waited for Jeruna's gaze to focus.

"Wrong about what?" She was just starting to worry.

"We didn't just make love," Kayla said. "We fell in love. That's what you meant to happen, wasn't it? Throw us together, put us in danger, but do it in Ethan's backyard, so he was comfortable and I was scared." You bitch, she thought. "Well, you didn't need to go to all that trouble." The bitter knot of words nearly choked her. "And that love is not for sale."

"We have a contract." Jeruna's face had gone white. Her image froze.

Multitasking.

"Don't bother." Kayla laughed harshly. "My broker was wrong about the degrade deadline. You don't have time to call in the storm troopers."

"You can't keep it. I know how this works." Jeruna clenched her fists. "Don't be stupid. You'll never work as a chameleon again, I'll make damn sure of that?

She had cut it fine but it happened as if she had pushed a button. She had never done this, had wondered how it would differ from the filter, where she slept, woke up fresh and new.

Ethan, she thought, focusing on his remembered face, his touch on her skin, the feel of him inside her, part of her. I can't just forget.

It faded . . . faded . . . lost meaning . . . a face . . . name gone . . . like water running out of the bathtub, Cup it in your hands, it's still gone . . .

A shrieking howl split her skull. Kayla blinked.

In her holo field, an aged woman clutched her head with both hands, her short-cropped hair sticking up in tuffs between her fingers. The client she had just interviewed with Jeruna something.

"No, you bitch, you're scamming me," the woman shrieked. "Ethan, give

me Ethan

She had gone for the dose, she remembered that. Nano failure? The woman was still screaming. "You'll have to talk to my broker," she said and blanked the field. The familiar headache clamped steel fingers into her skull and she sucked in a quick breath, groaned. This should be happening at An Yi's clinic, not here. Kayla touched her aching head gingerly and shuffled to her kitchen wall for tea. It had to be a failure. How long ago had she taken the dose? "Date check?" she said and the numbers leaped to life in the now-empty field.

She stared at them numbly, cold fear filling her.

Not possible.

She dropped her tea, barely felt the scalding splash as the cup bounced, raced to the futon sofa, pulled her private journal from its place beneath the frame. The book fell open, a dry and wrinkled fern leaf marking the place. A page had been torn out ... the notes about the last dose? The one

for the woman who had screamed at her?

I'm through. The looping letters leaped off the page at her. I know you're going to freak, but this has to stop. I lost something in the past few days. You don't know about it because you never experienced it, but it mattered. Every time I do this, I create a "we" . . . the me who lived this, and the you on the other side of the filter. I . . . we . . . . we're a hundred women, and what have we all lost? I don't know. You don't know. I'm not going to tell you any more, because it really is gone forever, and it didn't happen to you. But it's not going to happen again. I kept the dose until it expired. Start looking for a job, honey. We . . . all of us . . . are done being a whore and we're out of a job.

Kayla dropped the book, numb. I didn't write this, she thought, but she had. The thoughts weren't all that unfamiliar. They mostly bothered her

in the middle of the night, right after she'd shed the dose.

What had happened?

She groped, strained, trying to remember, saw An Yi's office, recalled their casual conversation, the feel of the recliner as An Yi prepared the dose....

... saw the woman's screaming face in her holo-field.

Azara's icon shimmered to life in the holo-field, seeming to pulse with anger. Kayla didn't bother to access it. You only stole one dose. After that, you were blacklisted. "I hope it was good," she said, and for all the bitterness in the words she felt . . . a tiny flicker of relief. Which was crazy. She looked around the apartment. "Nice while we had it."

Azara sent her a termination notice and an official citation that her union seal had been rescinded permanently. And a quiet promise of vengeance couched in polite langauge. Kayla left the city, went east, covering her tracks and hoping Azara wasn't willing to spend too much monev to find her. She found a studio in a sprawling suburban slum, part of an ancient single-family home, maybe the living room, she thought. Communal bath and kitchen, but her room had a tiny sink with cold but drinkable water and she had cooked with a microwave and electric grill for years before she became a chameleon, so it wasn't too bad. She found a job, too, working as a waitress in one of the city hotspots. Good tips because she was pretty and the empathy that had made her a good chameleon made customers like her.

Some mornings she remembered her dreams. And then she sifted through them, wondering if they were part of those final, lost, few days.

Fall came with rain, and mud, and long, wet waits for the light rail into the city. And then, one morning, as she watered the little pots of blooming plants she had bought in the night market to brighten the room, someone knocked on her door. "Who's there?" she asked, peering through the tiny peephole in the door that constituted "security" in this place. Her neighbor, Suhara, asking to "borrow" a bit of rice, she thought. Again.

But the man on the far side of the door was a stranger.

"Kayla, you don't remember me. But we were . . . friends."

The catch in his voice . . . or maybe it was his voice alone . . . made her start, like an electric shock. The key, she thought, and thought about ignoring him, calling Dario, the big wrestler in the back unit, to come run this guy off.

I don't want to know, she thought, but she opened the door after all and stepped back to let him in. Cute guy. Her heart began to beat faster. He looked around, his expression . . . agonized.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said. "You don't . . . remember me."

It was a statement, but his eyes begged.

She took her time, examining his hair, his slightly haggard face, the casual clothes made of expensive natural fiber, whose labels made him an insider, one of the elite. Well, those had been her clients. As she shook her head, his shoulders drooped.

"I know something happened," she said. "Maybe between us. The mem-

ory is simply gone. I'm sorry."

"You didn't find . . . any notes to yourself? Letters about . . . about what happened?"

About me, he had started to say. She shook her head.

"That was my fault. I was angry. And then . . ." He closed his eyes. "I got sick, really sick, had picked up some kind of drug-resistant tropical epizootic. By the time I was well enough to look . . . it was too late. The nano

Home Movies 143 had expired, you had moved, and . . . I couldn't find you. And I was angry when you last saw me. I knew you'd think that I . . . " He balled his fist suddenly, slammed it into his thigh. "You really don't remember, it's all gone, all of it."

His anguish was so strong that it filled the room. Without thought she took a step forward, put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know that I want you to . . . . tell me." She met his eyes, hazel, but with gold flecks in their depths. "It really is gone." And you're an insider, she thought. And I am not.

He looked past her, his eyes fixed on a middle distance. "Will you come have dinner with me?"

"I told you....

"I know. I heard you." He looked at her finally and the ghost of a crooked smile quirked the corner of his mouth. "I won't talk about . . . that time. I just want to have dinner with you."

She was good at reading people and he didn't feel like a threat. "Sure," she said. Because he was cute, whatever had happened in the past. And

she liked him. "I'm off tonight."

"Great." His eyes gleamed gold when he smiled. "I play music . . . when I'm not rooting around in the jungle for no very lucrative reason." He waited for a heartbeat and sighed. "I have a gig tonight on the other side of the city. After dinner . . . would you like to come listen? I play classical jazz. Really old stuff. And . . "His gold eyes glinted. "I come from a family branch that breaks rules. Sometimes really big ones."

Whatever that meant. He was actually nervous, as if she might refuse. "Sure." She smiled, took his hand. For an instant, as their hands touched, she saw green leaves, golden light, smelled humid ty, flowers, rot, and soil. Funny how smell was the strongest link to the fragments of past jobs that had seeped past the nano. All of a sudden, his hand felt ... familiar.

"I'd love to come hear you play." O



## THE TREE OF LIFE DROPS PROPAGULES

Children are introduced to evolution by way of the tree of life. Rooted in the primordial past, this fine, clean-limbed deciduous tree springs straight and clear, boughs branching cleanly. so that even the young can see how man and ape are different. cat and dog are different. frog and snake are different. but all are cousins at the base. This tree, usually a de-specified elm or perhaps red maple. implies clarity and tacit humanism.

Fools. The tree of life was drawn by fools, men, and northerners, Humans for whom all the major questions of life are settled, all the seasons of the world defined. Women, the wise, and southerners know different. Rather than a maple, the tree of life's a walking mangrove. Its roots don't go down, branch, and anchor,

they go down, and up, reach out, and through, so that who spawns who, who's your daddy, who's your cousin and who's on top isn't ever clear. In fact, sometimes the tree of life drops propagules. Things intended as roots, meant to anchor evolution's shoreline. but which take independent form and walk off on their own. Life, neither directly linked or independent. and hard to classify. If you don't believe me, ask my septic tank. It started singing vesterday, in part to answer my garage. Both of which sing counterpoint and dance erratic partner with the Chevy up on blocks. And none of which are cleanly clearly cousins or distinctly not.

Place those in your maple tree of life and watch it bend and crumple. But place them in your walking mangrove and we're all just propagules.

-Greg Beatty



### THE OSTEO-MANCER'S SON

#### Greg van Eekhout

Greg van Eekhout's stories have appeared in Asimov's, F&SF, Starlight 3, Realms of Fantasy, and Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, among other places. His story "In the Late December" was nominated for the Nebula Award last year. A year ago, Greg's first story for us, which he co-wrote with Michael J. Jasper—"California King" (April/May 2005)—was about several generations of a conjuring family. He returns to our pages with a new tale that looks at another family whose magic runs deep in their bones.

The bus comes to a stop at Wilshire and Fairfax, just a few blocks from the La Brea Tar Pits. When the doors hiss open, the tar smell washes over me. Thick and ancient, it snakes through my sinuses and settles in the back of my brain like a ghost in the attic.

"Get off or stay on," the driver says. So I step off into the haunted air. The walk to Farmer's Market is too short. Not enough time for me to change my mind. For a moment, I wonder if looking at my wallet photo of Miranda might give me some more courage. I know every detail by heart: She's smiling and squinting into the camera, her face sun-dappled and brilliant. The ice cream cone I bought her on her third birthday is a pink smear across her face.

It's easier to think of her that way than to contemplate the handker-

chief inside my bowling bag and the small bone contained within its linen folds.

I put my head down and keep walking, entering a maze of stalls and awnings, of narrow paths crowded with bins and baskets and little old ladies with sharp elbows. Shopping carts bark my shins and roll over my toes. Ranchero music and some kind of Southeast Asian pop bounces off my head.

"Hey, you got problem?" A man behind the counter beckons with a hooked finger, his face brown and creased like a cinnamon stick. "You got problem, yeah. I can tell. I got just what you need." With a knife, he sweeps bright orange dust into a little paper envelope. It looks like that dehydrated cheese powder that comes with instant macaroni.

"What's that?" I ask.

His smile reveals several gold teeth. "Come from dragon turtle. You see giant dragon turtle wash up in San Diego? You see that on news?"

"I'm not really up on current events." Especially not as regurgitated by

state-controlled news organizations.

He nods enthusiastically and edges more powder into the envelope. "This come from San Diego dragon turtle. Wife's younger brother, he life-guard. He scrape some turtle shell before Hierarch's men confiscate whole carcass."

"What's it for?" I ask, indicating the powder-filled envelope.

"All sorts of stuff. Rheumatism, kidney stones, migraine, epilepsy, bedroom problems . . . All sorts."

"No, thanks," I say as I try to shoulder my way back into the crowd. "Get you girls," he calls after me. "Make you animal! Guaranteed!"

Dragon turtle can't do any of those things, of course. Not that it's genuine turtle he's selling. I figure it for flour and sulfur, with maybe the tiniest pinch of rhinoceros horn thrown in. You can't even put a street value on the genuine stuff these days.

I know. I've experienced the genuine stuff. It's in my bones.

One Sunday afternoon I found a piece of kraken spine while walking down Santa Monica Beach with Dad. It was a cold day, the sand a sloping plain of gray beneath a slate sky, and we were both underdressed for the weather. But it was Sunday, the one day of the week we had together, and I had wanted to go to the beach.

I spotted the spine in the receding foam of the surf. It was just a fragment, like a knitting needle, striped honey and black. I showed it to Dad.

"Good eye," he said, resting his hand on my shoulder. "I don't see many of these outside a locked vault." In his white shirt and gray slacks, he looked like one of the seagulls wheeling overhead. I imagined him spreading his long arms to catch the wind and float to the sky.

I, on the other hand, took after my mom—short and stocky, skin just a shade paler than terra cotta. "Your father is made of air," Mom once told me. "That's why he's so hard to understand; he's not always down here

with us. But you and me, kid, you and me are plain as dirt."

Dad held out his hand for the spine. "Kraken live in the deeps," he said. "They hunt for giant squid and sperm whale. Sometimes, in a fight, the

spines break off and they wash ashore." He smelled the spine, inhaling so deeply it was almost an act of aggression. "You've found good bone. Daniel Better than mammoth tusk

"Really?" John Blackland had never been known to lavish idle praise.

"Retter than all the La Brea stuff in fact. The kraken is even older

I waited while my father's thoughts followed their own silent paths. Then, brightly, he told me to find a shell, "Abalone would be perfect, but I'll take anything from the sea I can use as a crucible."

Within a few minutes I'd located half a mussel shell. We sat on the sand, the shell between us, and Dad cooked the tip of the kraken spine over the flame of his Zippo. Thin tendrils of smoke rose from the spine, smelling of salt and earth and dark, deep mud.

When a single drop of honey-colored fluid oozed from the tip of the spine into the shell. Dad killed the flame. "Okay," he said, "Good, Now, do like me." He lifted the shell to his mouth and lightly touched his tongue to the fluid. I did the same. It burned, but not more than a too-hot mug of cocoa. The oil tasted exactly as it smelled, like something that had come from dark and forgotten places, but also from inside me.

"Quick, now, Daniel, Hold my hand,"

For a few moments, the waves crashed ashore and the gulls cried overhead and I shivered in the cold. Then it started. A prickling sensation ran across my skin, raising goose bumps. The tiny hairs on my arms stood at attention. Then it was popping in my body, as though my blood were carbonated. It hurt, and I felt it in my lips and eyes, a million pinpricks.

I looked at Dad. His face was a blur. He was actually vibrating, and I realized I was, too, and he smiled at me, "Don't be afraid," he said, his

voice shuddering, "Trust me."

I wasn't afraid. Or, rather, the scared part of me was smaller than the part that was thrilled at the power of my father, the power of the kraken. the power inside me.

Lightning struck, Silver-white, cracking bursts.

Pain took me. I screamed, desperately trying to let some of it out, but there was only more. My body was a sponge for it, with limitless capacity. Pain replaced everything.

When my world finally stilled and my eyes could once again see, Dad and I were surrounded by a moat of liquefied sand, Black, gooey glass

smoked and bubbled.

"The kraken is a creature of storms," Dad said. "Now, a part of it will always rage inside you. That's the osteomancer's craft: To draw magic from bones, to infuse it into your own." He looked at me a long time, as if to see if Lunderstood

The pain was over, but the memory of it roiled inside and around me, like smoke from a fire.

Trust me, he'd said.

"Don't tell your mom about this. That kraken spine could have paid for your college education."

Farther back in the recesses of Farmer's Market, closer to the Tar Pits.

the smell of asphalt clogs the air. Black ooze seeps through cracks in the alley, and when I walk, my shoes stick to the ground. There's black tar under the pavement. Pockets of gas lurk beneath the sidewalks like jellyfish.

Storage sheds and small warehouses line the alley, guarded by guys, teenagers, just a few years younger than me. They conceal their hands in the pockets of their roomy pants and watch me make my way down a row of cinderblock structures. I stop before a building with a steel roll-down door, and four guards converge on me, forming a diamond with me at the center.

"You must be lost," one says.

They all have eyes the color of coffee ice cream and the same face. Not just similar in appearance, but identical. Maybe they're quadruplets, but more likely they're mirror-spawn. It takes pretty deep magic to create them, but when it comes to the Hierarch and his interests, no expense is ever spared. These guys aren't just rent-a-cop security. These guys are weapons.

"Are these warehouses?" I say waving vaguely at the buildings around

us.

The four share a look and nod in unison.

"Then I think I'm in the right place."

"You'd have been better off lost," says the one behind me. "What's in the bowling bag?"

"A bowling ball."

"What kind?"

"Brunswick." That's the name written on the bag.

"I like to bowl," they all say together. Then, just the one behind me:

"Let's take a peek inside."

Two of them unzip the bag, while the other two keep their eyes on me. I reach into my coat pocket and all four get ready to pounce. "Relax," I say, pulling out my leather glasses case. "Just putting on my shades."

Which, really, is all I do.

Frowns form on the faces of the four mirror-spawn. They blink. They work their lips a little. "What are you looking at?" they all ask each other.

"Nothing," they all decide.

Their diamond formation loosens, and they go back to whatever they were doing before I showed up. I take my bowling bag and continue looking for the right warehouse.

When my first baby tooth fell out I tucked it under my pillow, just as Mom had told me to. The next morning the tooth was gone but I found no coin. Mom and Dad were arguing in the living room. I wanted to go out and see Dad, but not until the fight was over.

I read some comics.

I glued plastic tusks on my Revel Colombian Mammoth model.

With my tongue, I probed the empty socket where my tooth had been. Finally, the noise in the other room died down, and I heard the front door open and shut. Moments later, a car started and drove away: Dad going back to his apartment.

"From now on," Mom said, standing in the doorway, "when you lose a

tooth, put it in an envelope for your father."

"What for?"

She gripped the doorjamb so tight her hand shook. "So he can eat it."

By that age, I already knew Dad worked for the Hierarch—the most

by that age, I already knew Dad worked for the Filerarel—the most powerful osteomancer of all—and I knew that made my father a very important man.

It wasn't until years later, until after the Night of Long Knives, that I knew Dad was a traitor.

This, I found out from Uncle Otis, my father's brother, who took me in after Dad was murdered and Mom defected to Northern California.

I'd left Otis when I turned sixteen and had nearly no contact with him until two weeks ago. I knew he helped out Connie and Miranda with money, dropped in on their little apartment in Boyle Heights to make sure they were okay, but I'd never asked him to do that and I refused to be grateful.

The door jingled as I entered his shop for the first time in seven years.

"You never got tall," he said by way of greeting.

He wasn't alone. On a stool behind a glass display counter of jewelry and cigarette cases and Zippo lighters sat a thin-shouldered man in a sweater the color of wilted lettuce. He gave me a smile with his lipless turtle mouth and took a sip from a Dodgers coffee mug.

"Nice to meet you, Daniel."

I took note of the turtle man's skin, teeth, fingernails. They were by no means healthy colors, but neither were they the deeply embedded telltale brown of a practicing osteomancer. I figured him for a supplier, like Otis.

I should have turned around, gone back home. Trafficking in osteomancy had been a bad idea since the Night of Long Knives—I was surprised Otis hadn't been caught yet—and I always got the feeling the Hierarch's eyes were on me, being the son of John Blackland.

Otis tried to introduce me to the turtle man. "Daniel, this is Mr.—" But the turtle man cut him off with a sharp look. Otis settled on telling me he

was a friend of my father's.

I took "friend" as a codeword for former co-conspirator. Dad had been a darling of the Hierarch until he'd decided there was too much power concentrated in the Hierarch's hands, and he hadn't been alone in this belief. Magic wants to be free. But after the Night of Long Knives, what had been the seeds of a revolution had degenerated into merely a black market for osteomantic materials. Now, it was just about skimming a bit off the Hierarch's profit.

I wanted no part of it. Not a sliver. But there was the lure of money and

pangs about how little I was doing for Miranda. "Is this a bag job?"

Otis nodded. "The sort of thing you're good at."

I had kept myself out of the family business, but that didn't mean I'd been walking the straight and narrow. Part of the reason I'd left Otis's care was because I felt he wasn't dealing fairly with me when fencing stuff I'd boosted from houses and businesses.

"It's a tricky job, in a place hard to get into and even harder to get out of."
"Government warehouse. I suppose?" Which was tantamount to a sui-

cide mission.

The turtle man looked at me with dark eyes. I recognized that look. In his head, he was stripping me of clothing and skin. He was wondering

what my skeleton looked like. "It's not just any government warehouse, Daniel. We're sending you into the Ossuary itself."

The Ossuary. The dragon's greatest treasure trove. The Hierarch's own

private stash.

I didn't bother explaining what an impossible task that would be. These guys were veterans. They wouldn't risk exposure in a pointless exercise. But they would risk my life to get their hands on the Hierarch's riches.

I, on the other hand, would not. "Thanks, Otis," I said, turning my back

and heading for the door. "Don't call me again."

I heard the turtle man's coffee cup clank against the glass counter, "You haven't even heard our terms."

"And I'm not going to," I said. "My daughter deserves a living father."

"Daniel, I have something for you." I stopped and watched Otis place a folded handkerchief on the glass counter. The look on his face was infinitely sad as he peeled back the corners of the handkerchief and revealed a small distal phalanx. A finger bone, A child's finger bone, not white, but already turning brown. The bone of a child who has been fed bone. When I was a kid, that's what my bones would have looked like, because even then. Dad was preparing me.

"It belongs to Miranda," the turtle man said. "Do the job or we'll piece

her out, bit by bit."

Dad lived in the back of his osteomancer's shop, and that's where I spent most of my time with him during weekend visits. Six years after that afternoon on the beach, I was in his workroom, watching a pair of horn-rimmed glasses bob inside a kettle of boiling oil. The lenses were blanks, but the frames were special, carved from the vertebrae of a Choctaw sint holo serpent. I was certain that Dad didn't have legal access to such materials. He'd probably obtained it in one of the back-alley exchanges he'd become increasingly involved with. Things had been different for him, lately. Once one of the Hierarch's chief men, now he was more and more on the fringes of things.

Dad stirred the oil with a copper spoon, sniffing the vapors that rose

from the pot. He quizzed me: "Any idea what these glasses will do?"

I was bored. Only eight blocks away there was a mall full of video games and CDs to shoplift and girls. I couldn't remember the last time Dad and I had talked about anything other than bones and oils and feathers and powders. Dad's world was full of dead things that stank.

"I have no idea what they do," I said. It was true, but it wasn't what

Dad wanted to hear.

He breathed a small sigh. "Smell it, Daniel. You can tell by smell.

Smells are ghosts. Let them in and they'll talk to you."

He wouldn't give up until I did as he asked, so, sullenly, I admitted the phantoms. Figuring out what they were trying to tell me was a process requiring the kind of patience and attention I could seldom be bothered to exhibit. I lowered my nose to the kettle.

First, there were my father's tells, not just because he was in the room, but because the kettle contained his magic. There was clean sweat. Old Spice. And tar. Deeply embedded, way down to the marrow of Dad's bones. My father's living ghost. And also something of me. Maybe some of my baby teeth. The smells were all mixed up, and I couldn't tell where he ended and I began.

"What do you think?" Dad whispered, bending close to my ear.

"It's like . . . something I can't hold onto. Like confusion."

Dad straightened. "It's in your bones, now, Daniel. You know how to let the old bones inside you. You only need to listen to them, and they'll tell you how to do whatever you need to do. That's osteomancy. That's deep magic." He gestured at his work counter, littered with jars and vials and little envelopes. "All else is merely recipe."

From outside, the sound of a helicopter rotor pounded the air. The phone rang. Dad went to the front room to answer it, and I stayed behind,

eavesdropping on his conversation.

"Not a good time, Otis." Then, his voice dropped. "Yes, I've got some-

thing cooking right now."

The sound of the helicopter grew closer, and now it sounded as though there were more than one. I went to the door and saw the look on Dad's face, the way the lines deepened, the haunted shadows of his eyes. "Who else did they get?" he said into the receiver, craning his neck to peer out the living room window. Dad listened to whatever Otis's answer was, his eyes shut tight. When he opened them, he saw me standing in the doorway. "Will you take care of him, Otis? Will you promise me?" There was a pause, and then he put the receiver back in its cradle.

Out on the street, car doors slammed. Dad came over to the workroom doorway and pushed me back inside. "The glasses aren't ready yet," he said. "Wait as long as you can before putting them on. Don't come out till you've heard the thunder. When you walk, make no noise." With that, he

shut the door on me.

A few moments later, I heard shouting in the living room, a scuffle. And then cracks of thunder, so close, like bombs detonating in my head. The loudest thing I'd ever heard.

Silence followed, broken by soft footsteps outside the workroom. The doorknob jiggled. Another beat of silence, and something impacted the

door, Wood splintered.

I ran to Dad's work counter. The glasses still tumbled inside the boiling oil. With a pair of copper tongs, I lifted out the glasses and put them on, hissing in pain as I burned my fingers and temples and the backs of my ears and the bridge of my nose. My skin blistered, and whatever substance Dad had used to fashion the frames leeched into me.

With another blow the door gave, hanging on one hinge, useless as a broken arm. Half a dozen cops surged in. A gray-haired man in a blue windbreaker, marked with the Hierarch's skull insignia, pushed to the front of the group. I backed up against the workbench. The man in the windbreaker was close enough to touch. He looked at me, right at me, and raised his hand as if to reach out and grab my throat. I remained silent, and he only blinked stupidly in my general direction.

My heart pounding, I forced myself to walk slowly past the cops, who flinched as though brushed by cobwebs. In the living room were four charred bodies. The flesh on their faces and hands bubbled, black and red.

The room stank of ozone and meat and kraken.

Dad hadn't managed to get them all. He was on his back. Three cops were cutting the skin off of him with long knives. They'd already flayed his arm, exposing the deep rich brown of his radius and ulna. And they'd

peeled his face back to expose his coffee-brown skull.

That night, I ran. Away from Dad's place, away from the rotor blades and searchlights. I ran until I could only walk, walked until I could only stumble, stumbled until I could only crawl. When morning broke, I woke up in wet sand and bathed myself in the cold waves that rolled in on the edge of a winter storm. I will live here, I thought. I will live here on the beach, and I will never take off these glasses, and I will live here as a ghost.

He was already dead, I told myself. When the men cut open Dad to take

his bones, he was already dead.

I would keep telling myself that until I could believe it.

The route to the Hierarch's ossuary takes me through a network of tunnels buried so deep beneath the city that, after a while, I can no longer feel the rumble of traffic from Wilshire Boulevard. The stench of tar and magic is almost a solid wall here, the ghosts so thick I can practically scoop them out of the air with my hands. Using the turtle man's collection of lock picks, stolen keys, alarm codes, passwords, and my father's glasses, I eventually find myself at the threshold of the Hierarch's ossuary.

Let's say you're sickeningly wealthy. And let's say what you're rich in is gold, and you want a big room in which to hoard your treasure. What could be more fitting, then, than a room built of solid gold bricks? The Hierarch's ossuary is kind of like that, only it's built of bone. The walls are mammoth femurs stacked end-to-end. The floor, a mosaic of various claws and delicate vertebrae and healing jewels pried from the heads of Peruvian carbuncles. Overhead, mammoth tusks form the dome deiling. And from the dome hangs a chandelier of unicorn horns, white as snow.

I remind myself to breathe.

Six sentries carry bayonets with basilisk-tooth blades. They exchange uneasy glances as I step deeper into the room. I've been warned by Otis and the turtle man that anyone I encounter this far inside the Hierarch's stronghold will have received advanced training. They will have tasted deep-magic bone.

"Hoss, you okay?" says one of the sentries.

Another shakes his head, looking directly at me. "Nope. Something's creeping me out."

"Yeah, me too. Think we should get the hound in here?" "Yeah." The sentry reaches for a wall-mounted phone.

I unlace my boot and pry it off. With everything I've got, I chuck it up at the unicorn chandelier. The horns shatter like glass, the sound of children shrieking. I backpedal to avoid the rain of shards.

The sentries look up in horror. They're in charge of protecting a lot of money, and something's just gone dreadfully wrong. They flutter about

the mess like maiden aunts over a collapsed soufflé.

I retrieve my boot and make a dash for a passageway into an even larger room.

The entrance of bone was made to impress. This place, large enough to berth an ocean liner, houses yet greater wealth. Floor-to-ceiling shelves occupy most of it, but there are also fully assembled skeletons in chain-link cages: a serpent at least one hundred yards long, a feline body as large as an elephant with a boulder-sized skull. And suspended overhead looms a kraken—flat, shovel-shaped head, tail half the length of a football field, and running down the tail, dozens of spines as long as jousting lances. The stench of its power makes my stomach churn.

There is really only one reason Otis and the turtle man chose me for this job. One thing I can do better than anyone else. There's a scent I'm sensitive to, one I can pick out like a bright white stripe on a black highway. I follow it to a row of towering shelves and bring over a ladder on wheels. I climb. Stacked on the shelves are long cardboard boxes. In front.

of my face is the one containing my father's bones.

His remains are powerful weapons. I understand why Otis and the tur-

Most of Dad is missing. Probably sold off. All that's left are some of the small bones of his hands, and some ground powder, just a pinch, in a glass vial. I unzip my bowling bag and dump the remains inside.

A voice from below: "Come down off that ladder, son,"

In a linen button-down shirt and tailored black slacks, the Hierarch isn't exactly what I expect, but I recognize his face from coins and postage stamps. He's thin and dark as bones from the tar pits, his fingernails, teeth and eyes saturated with maric.

"Those glasses of yours are very clever," he says, inhaling deeply. "Sint holo serpent bones and Deep Rhys herbs. Two sources of invisibility, mixed together, along with your own essence. That's good work. But it's

not fooling me, so you might as well come on down now."

I grip the ladder to keep my hands from shaking. I can smell him. His magic is old. "So, you really hang out in your own warehouse? Don't tell

me you drive the forklifts."

He smiles indulgently. "No, that takes special training I lack. But when thieves get this far past my defenses, I take a personal interest. Now, please, come down."

"Not just yet. I like the view from up here. You have a lot of nice things.

Is that really a sphinx?" I wonder if he's noticed my legs shaking.

"Yes. One of only three ever found."

"Where are the other two?"

"I smoked them." And he spits at me. He fires up a dark brown glob that splatters on my cheek. It burns me like acid, hurting so bad, filling

me with pain and surprise, that I can't even scream.

A curtain of gray descends over my vision, and I lose balance, falling off the ladder, eight feet down to the concrete floor. I huddle there at the Hierarch's feet, struggling not to give in to the tempting relief of unconsciousness. My cheek burns. And I think I've broken my right arm. But somehow—reflex, dumb luck, who knows?—I've managed to hold onto the bowling bag containing father's bones. Some of the bones have fallen out. The vial of powder lies shattered, its contents spilled.

I have to get to my feet. I can do this. I can make myself do this. Using

my good arm to push myself up, I manage to drive my palm into the tiny shards of glass from the broken vial.

ards of glass from the broken vial.
"Are you okay?" the Hierarch asks. I can bear the flesh on my face sizzle.

I try to say "fine," but the word won't come out.

"So, who's that in the bowling bag?"

"John Blackland," I rasp. "He was an osteomancer."

The Hierarch puts his hands in his pockets and bounces on the balls of his feet, as if stretching out his calf muscles. "This entire section of the ossuary is full of osteomancers. It's the osteomancer section. I suppose you're John Blackland's son?"

The Hierarch's spit continues to burn. "Yeah," I gasp. "Daniel Blackland."
It feels like someone's drilling into the cracked bones of my right arm.

And my cheek . . . the air hits exposed bone.

The Hierarch squints at the hole in my face as if checking out a door ding on a parked car. "If it's any comfort, you got farther than most. No doubt you've come equipped with some powerful osteomantic weapons. But look at me." He holds his brown hands up toward my face. "I've smoked, eaten, inhaled, and injected more ancient and secret animals than anyone alive. I'm the Hierarch."

"How could I have done this better?" I ask.

"I do make public appearances, you know. You could have tried a car bomb. Or a high-powered rifle. You revenge-obsessed boys have extraordinary passion, but it seems to get in the way of achieving practical goals."

He thinks this is about vengeance, not simple theft. I'm out of courage, and hope, and pretty much everything. But then Dad talks to me. He begins softly, through weak and subtle scents that waft up from his scattered bones: tar, the salt tang of kelp, and a trace of something clean and dark and old from the sea bottom.

That's the osteomancer's craft. To draw magic from bones, to infuse it

into your own.

My father turned me into a weapon. And while I was off, screwing around, I let inheritors of my father's noble cause turn Miranda into a weapon. I've still got her in my bowling bag. I am a vessel carrying three generations of power. But I'll die before I use my daughter in that way.

Broken arm. Face being eaten away. Glass splinters in my good hand. I put my palm to my ruined cheek. Screaming, I rub residue of my father's

ground-up bones into my raw flesh.

Firecrackers pop under my skin.

The Hierarch sees what I've done, and he begins to exude something. A toxic stench, thick as mud, fills my head, more and more until I hear myself shriekhing with blind pain.

The Hierarch coughs, and he coughs and coughs, and his eyes never leave mine. His jaw unhinges like a snake's, and brown fluid gushes out of him. Where it hits the floor, concrete liquefies and boils away.

"If there's anything left of you," he says, his voice gargly, "I'll drink it

with green tea.

I don't know if I'll live, but I know the Hierarch has lost. Because, overhead, the spines of the kraken skeleton vibrate and sing. And just before the Hierarch unleashes another torrent of magic from inside, the storm I

called with Dad strikes. The bolts come down. The bolts come out of me. They come from Dad's bones, soaked with Dad's magic, mixed in my blood. They come from spirits and memories.

When it's over, the Hierarch's charred body melts into a puddle of

brown, sizzling fluid.

Ding-dong, dead.

I should just walk out of here. With my glasses, I can get past the guards and get as far from the ossuary as a guy with a broken arm and a ravaged face can get.

But the residue of the Hierarch is rich, powerful magic. There's got to

be a sponge and bucket around here somewhere.

We've been driving all day and all night and have been for a few days. Connie rides with Miranda in the back, singing Spanish lullabies, trying to get her to stop crying. I cooked up a salve for her hand, and I don't think it hurts her any longer, but the girl misses the tip of her finger. Of course she does. How could she not? When she's older, maybe I'll give it to her and she can wear it on the end of a necklace.

And once that thought is complete, I want to hit myself. Isn't that the

sort of thing Dad might do?

At least once every hour I'm tempted to turn the car around and head back to Los Angeles. There's a fight being waged between high-ranking ministers and osteomancers, between freelancers and opportunists and twisted idealists like Otis and the turtle man. I shouldn't be tempted to head back and join in, but I am. I'm pretty sure I would prevail. After drinking the Hierarch's remains, I may well be the most powerful osteomancer in all the Californias. Possibly the most powerful on the entire continent. Part of me wants that power. There's something in my bones that craves it.

But then, when the hunger gets too strong, I lean back and get a whiff of Miranda. She carries the taint of magic, a scent much older than she is, and I won't stop driving till all I can smell is baby powder and shampoo and clean, soft skin. O

#### BRICK, CONCRETE, AND STEEL PEOPLE

If brick, concrete, and steel people were the world, there would be none of your fleshy insinuations into the structures that surround us.

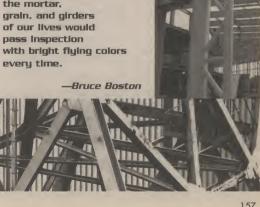


None of your grating innuendoes to debilitate the daul

We would build from the ground up and when we discovered a fault we would break it down and begin afresh.

Standing in the brisk light of early dawn we would salute the towers that rise about and above us.

If brick, concrete, and steel people were the world. the mortar. grain, and girders of our lives would pass Inspection with bright fluing colors



## NOT WORTH A CENT

#### R. Neube

R. Neube tells us that this story originated, "as more than a few of my stories do, while I was waiting for a city bus. This burly teen started spouting hundred-decibel abuse at a nigh-fossilized codger. The punk made the mistake of shoving the old man, giving the elder the space he needed to swing his cane. Babe Ruth would have been proud. As I watched the crying punk crawl away, it started me thinking . . ."

he bent old man watched the two young thugs enter the ruins of the warehouse. The thugs moved slowly. Between them, they strutted fifty kilos of surgically-implanted muscles.

The old man withdrew a cigarette and torched it. The thugs took a step back.

"That poison will kill you," said the thug with electric-orange hair

braided into a pillar atop his head.
"On my hundredth birthday, I realized death means nothing. I started smoking, eating bacon, even guzzling vodka." William Stewart laughed.

The sound echoed like the song of a ghost.
"Got the money?" asked the plaid-haired thug. He dropped a small bag

on the wooden bench.

William shuffled to the bench, taking an oblique path to keep both thugs in front of him. "Let me see the drugs." Wrinkled hands dived into the pockets of his faded windbreaker. One hand emerged with five one thousand dollar bills. Dropping the banknotes on the bench, William opened the sack. He examined a vial, then another.

Plaid snatched the bag away with two fingers. "There's a slight complication, cent."

William cringed at the pejorative, remembering a day when living over

a century earned a person some respect.

"Someone else will pay us eight thou. So, we're taking your money." Plaid's knife snapped open.

William stepped back, shrinking inside his jacket. "You know, this same

rip-off thing happened to me back in '68, I-"

"What do you mean '68? It's only 2055, you old fool."
"Don't think of it as a rip-off. Think of it as education."

William drew a small handgun. Pop, pop, pop, pop, pop. The old man graneed. "How the hell did you miss twice at spitting distance?" William groused as he leaned over to fire another bullet into Orange.

His back crackled as he searched the thugs. A few bucks, the knife, and a roll of antacids went into the sack with the drugs and gun. The sack

went into a mesh shopping bag, that badge of the elderly.

"Didn't you hear? Everybody loses these days."

William ambled from the warehouse, cutting across abandoned railroad tracks dappled in twilight. Nobody gave him a second glance. Not the homeless in their shanty town blocking the tracks. Not the young peo-

ple living in the Graduation Projects beyond the tracks.

Jackson Commune stood in the center of Franklin Street. In the nineteenth century, the three-story palace had been built for a beer king. In the twentieth, it became an apartment building amidst an expanding ghetto. At the dawn of the current century, it had been renovated by the Jacksons, professors at OSU. Health freaks, they spent a million apiece for rejuvenation treatments then coming on the market. Whereupon the jet bringing them home crashed.

Chester, the black-sheep cousin, inherited the house. He threw a party that lasted four years, until he dropped dead of pleasure. By then, a dozen cents lived there. Chester's lover, Jennifer, formalized the communal arrangement. With Chester buried in the basement, Jennifer kept Chester's identity alive for twenty years with bank accounts that scrupu-

lous paid their taxes and utilities.

William Stewart wheezed up the long flight of foot-polished limestone steps to the front porch. It was May, and the honeysuckle already carpeted the outside of the house. He leaned against a pillar. Long, deep breaths helped still his pounding heart, his laboring lungs.

"You murder two punks without breaking a sweat, yet you are too vain

to allow your housemates see you winded. Pathetic, Billy boy."

He entered after the householdputer identified his handprint and unlocked the front door. A pile of suitcases announced a new member of the commune. They were top of the line, real leather. A sticker on the side of one chilled his marrow. TOLEDO FEDERAL PENITENTIARY, it read.

William tooled into the kitchen. A herd of dwarf rabbits—Jennifer's pride and joy—stampeded into the pantry. A snoring Kent slumped over the kitchen table. Taking the last cup, William loaded the coffeemaker, starting another pot.

Fortified, he climbed two flights of steep steps, the servants' stairs. On

Not Worth a Cent 159

the third floor it opened into the death room. Doc Meyer had painted it a cheerful yellow.

Alicia occupied the bed, a tiny lump lost under fresh percale sheets. In the corner, Doc Meyer pressed her pug nose against a computer monitor. Long fingers manipulated a slide under the vidscope.

"How's our patient?" William whispered. He always whispered in the

death room.

Doc Meyer jerked around. Her blue eyes widened. She was the kid in the commune, barely seventy-five—not even retirement age. Not that she would qualify for Social Security benefits once she reached retirement age next year. Convicted felons lost their rights to collect any government payment.

William stood taller in her presence, every creaking vertebra straight. Who knows, he thought, someday she might even tell me her given name.

Solving that mystery would almost be as good as sex. Almost.

She sighed. "Alicia's infection stems from one of the Boston Bacteria,

but I can't isolate which one. Did you get the drugs?"

William smiled broadly, grateful the last thing he got from the government—before his hundredth birthday disqualified him from Social Security—was a new set of teeth. "Would I disappoint you?" He handed her four vials, his fingers caressing her cool skin.

"Were you able to get them to lower the price?"

"Net cost, zilch. Don't ask how. The commune's med fund remains intact." He set the cash on her desk. "Is that enough to impress you out of your ieans?"

She studied the vials. "This," she waved a brownish vial, "was developed from mustard gas. Modern medicine is reduced to poisoning our patients to kill the cures we invented. I hope she's strong enough to survive the

treatment."

It was the rare cent who had not been treated with Boston Bacteria to consume their cancers. The Nobel Prizes had already been awarded before the anti-cancer array of bacteria mutated, invading the general pop-

ulation to cause an epidemic du jour.

Had Alicia been ten years younger, she would have been diagnosed during her mandatory biannual Medicare checkup. A short stay in the hospital would have sufficed to kill the bacteria consuming her. But Alicia wasn't young enough to qualify for Medicare. A hospital would have required a twenty grand deposit before a doctor would see her, so Alicia had ended up in the commune's death room.

"Need me to donate more blood?" he asked as his imagination began to

undress the doctor.

"No, you gave last week. The new guy is O-pos, too. I'll tap him."

"Know anything about him?"

"Stash the paranoia, Stewart, he's not a real criminal."

"Call me William."

"The poor guy was busted under the Crimes Against the Economy Act." "I'd rather have a serial killer stay here than a leveraged buy-out bastard who unemployed millions of—"

"He's Hiram Bigg," she said, her eyebrows dancing.

"That hillbilly magnate who bought Kentucky? What's he doing in Object You can't get a decent bowl of grits for a hundred miles."

"Be nice he's on the lam. After he got out of prison, Bigg's creditors got a court order to send him to a labor camp until he pays back his debts.

William chuckled. "You just can't win. Let's see, at minimum wage times eighty hours a week on the assembly line, how long will it take to nay back \$350,000,000,000? Wait, don't tell me. I was good with word problems in school. The answer is: the train reaches Chicago first."

"You're not funny Stewart"

"Call me Bill"

"Be nice to him. Stewart. Alicia needs his blood." She made shooing motions

William stopped by Alicia on his way out. It was hard to reconcile the husk with the vivacious blonde who stormed into the commune a decade

William suspected that her rejuvenation treatment had something to do with her illness. Of course, it could be nothing more than his native paranoja. Lots of cents ended up in "conspiracy camps," looney bins devoted to the hopelessly paranoid.

"Part and parcel of the plot against us," he muttered.

He laughed. It was the only right left to him.

William limped down the stairs after his nap. In the kitchen, a halffilled coffeepot awaited. Kent sat upright in a chair, eves wide open. mouth agape. Only a rattling snore showed he was alive.

"What's the sense of living so long, if you're going to sleep it all away?" "Long as it makes him happy," drawled a lanky man walking into the

kitchen. He poured himself a cup.

William eved the stranger while he reloaded the coffeemaker, "One of the house rules is that we keep a pot of java going around the clock." He fished a pack of smokes from his pocket, "Scared of secondhand smoke, Grit Boy?"

The newcomer took a cigarette, flaming it with a Flying Tigers Zippo. "You must be Stewart. What were you before becoming the commune's

enforcer?"

"Must have worked a hundred jobs, but my fave was garbageman." He studied the ex-billionaire to judge his reaction. One wrong word and William would hate him; hate was such a simple, effortless emotion.

"I've had my hundred jobs, too, Golden Glove boxer, semi-pro quarterback. When I dropped out of college," said Hiram, voice dreamy, "I formed a trash hauling company in southeastern Kentucky. It was a good two years." "Spent nineteen years on the back of a truck," interjected William.

"Nineteen years? Did they lay you off ere you qualified for a pension?"

"Naw, I was forced to retire after some aluminum cans went missing. They couldn't prove anything, but the bosses took their recyclables seriously."

"I thought I was screwed." Hiram Bigg held onto his pronouns until they drawled into entire paragraphs of their own. "A career destroyed over tin cans"

Not Worth a Cent 161 "Aluminum. I would have made a lot more money embezzling 6,400 tons of tin cans." William smiled.

"Tons?"

"Ain't no petty crimes, just petty criminals," William counter-drawled.
"Are you trying to disguise yourself as Abe Lincoln? Is your hair dyed?"
He tugged the man's beard.

"If I was going for a dye job, I'd get one of those plaid jobs the kids are

wearing." Bigg snorted smoke as he laughed.

Kent opened his eyes, shouted, "What is Cheyenne, Alex?" He blinked twice before returning to his snooze.

Jennifer drifted into the room. Such was her grace that it seemed she saided on winds that caressed her alone. The light played with her silverdyed hair, eyes, and skin.

"Howdy do, I'm Hiram Bigg."

Jennifer ignored him, drifting into the pantry. Pots rattled. Cansbanged.

William refilled his coffee cup, then Bigg's. "C'mon, Jennifer doesn't like people in her kitchen while she's cooking. Don't take it personally." William noticed the magnate eyeing Kent. "He's not people. He's a toadstool"

They went onto the front porch, sitting on a swing. Dots and slashes of Franklin Street were visible through the thick mass of honeysuckle twining the mesh fence surrounding the porch. Noses sought their perfume, but only the road exhaust from the nearby interstate could be discerned.

"What are the odds of the cops tracking you here?"

"Nil. My spoor goes south from Louisville to Alabama. Spent half my life telling folks Ohio was hell. Nobody'll look for me in Columbus."

"Sentenced to hell. How poetic. Rule One, you bring pain to this house,

and I promise you a world of hurt."

"Beth warned me yer a hard case."

"Beth?"

"Doctor Meyer. Her sister was my Attorney General after I purchased Kentucky, Good woman, All the Meyer women are good."

"Her name is Beth?" He pulled a bottle of generic vodka from his pocket. After a long swig, he offered it to Bigg.

"Naw, I blew out my liver years ago."

"Had to give up every vice when I was fifty after a cardiac event. My doc told me I'd be dead by sixty, so during the second fifty years of my life, I lived like a monk. I don't intend to live a third fifty. Isn't worth the hassle."

"You look good for a cent. When did you have your rejuv?" Bigg finger-

combed his lush, black hair,

"Never have. Guess I have good genes," replied William, fingercombing his thin, grey hair. "The only time I saved enough money for rejuv, I had to have new lungs installed instead."

"That was the only stroke of luck I had owning Kentucky. I knew it was going to be the toughest job of my life, so I went into a rejuv clinic when I was fifty-five." His deep-set eyes grew misty. "If I had another two or three years, I could have turned my Commonwealth into paradise."

William nodded politely. "Just out of curiosity, how did you pay for a

frigging state?"

"Put it on my Platinum Card. It was a publicity stunt I worked out with the corporation. They gave me zero interest for a year, and I made commercials for 'em."

"Is looking like Lincoln part of the stunt?"

"Part of my genetic pool."

"Lucky you, Grit Boy."

William stretched across the threadbare couch, watching generic news about a generic world, starting with the latest bankruptcy of Social Security.

Doc Meyer ghosted into the room. Before she sat on the arm of the couch, she hit the mute button on the remote. Her sigh was eloquent luggage for the dark bands under her eyes. Her pouting mouth opened and closed

William patiently waited for her to speak. One eye strayed to the shapely ankle exposed by her long linen dress.

"Stewart we have a situation "

"Alicia?"

"No, she'll be fine, sort of. The situation—"

"Oh, mannn, every time you use that s-word, I end up committing another felony." William's laugh cracked as the doctor's blue eves flamed.

"This is serious, Stewart."

"Call me Bill, or even William."

"I found one of Jennifer's rabbits dead."

"Colonel Mustard did it with a wrench in the basement."

"I did an autopsy."

"Jennifer will have a fit about you cutting up one of her bunnies."

"The furball died of TB-3."

"Can rabbits give people TB?" William blurted, snapping upright, dreading the chore of killing the pets.

"We gave it to them. It's not a lung disease for rabbits. The bacteria attacks their brains. It cannot be communicated to humans unless we eat them." The doctor wived her sweating brow.

"W-we gave it to them?"

"The twins came from New York City the summer after that big epidemic up there. Kelly was treated. But when I asked her just now, she admitted she didn't complete the treatment. It would have gotten in the way of her Bermuda vacation. When will patients learn to complete their drug regimen?"

"So Kelly gave it to the rabbits?"

"We've all got it. Jennifer, Kent, Alicia, Ted, and Becky," her voice quivered as she added, "Me. You and Hiram are the only safe ones. Hiram because the infectious phase ended months ago. You because—" She waved at the old scar twaining his chest. "Because you've had the old variety of TB, you're immune to TB-3. Lucky bastard."

"Tell me about it. Fifty years later, and these new lungs still feel weird."

"Stop whining, Stewart."

"Could you call me Bill just once, Beth?"

An ephemeral smile crosses her long face. "It sounds so sweet coming from your mouth. I hate my middle name. Beth was my mother's name. She once put out a cigarette on the back of my hand because I refused to eat cauliflower"

"Sorry, uh, Meyer."

"This commune will be a cemetery before the end of the year unless you can get us some Luewat Toxin to treat the TB. We've got \$9,900 in the med fund, another \$1,280 in the general fund."

"How much toxin will that buy?" William asked, trying to recall whether the toxin came from Amazonian frogs or Afghan voles.

"Perkins' Pharmacy offered me the best deal-eight grand a dose. Times nine that-"

"Equals \$82,000." William grinned. "Math was my best subject at school."

"Equals \$72,000. We can't mortgage the house because that might reveal our little Chester secret. Jennifer and I have a few grand in the bank. But not enough. Everyone else is broke."

"I've only got chump change. Mannn, nobody wins these days."

"FEMA stores Luewat Toxin at the HMO Depository over on Fourth." "You won't call me Bill. Won't even tell me your first name, let alone

sleep with me. But now you want me to burgle a depository. Who the hell do you think I am?"

She stood. Her dress fell to the floor. Its wind caused a baseball-sized clump of rabbit fur to tumbleweed across the floor.

"Don't you know anything about romance? The least you could do is get

me drunk first," said William.

The thunder of the rabbit herd echoed down the steps. They raced into the living room, diving beneath the couch.

"Mannn, you make me feel like a hooker," William whispered.

She grabbed her dress off the floor, hugging it. "Sorry, I didn't mean-" "That's not a bad thing, Meyer."

"Reagan, My name is Reagan Beth Meyer, I was an election eye baby."

"Ugh, my hapless Dulcinea. I think I'll call you R.B."

"You're not going to make roast beef jokes, are you, Bill?"

"You'll always be my cheddar melt of love. Now, go away. I've got some thinking to do."

Throwing a puzzled glance over her slumping shoulder, she was so

busy nonplussing that she walked into the door frame.

William couldn't restrain the laughter. His spine crunched like stepping on peanut shells as he came off the couch to join her. "Okav. R.B. You want to treat me like a hooker. Fine. I get five bucks an hour, plus a dollar an orgasm bonus."

The Drug Depository was located two blocks beyond the downtown corporate core. That was lucky. The corporations fielded their own copsearning three times what the harried local police made, HMO Ohio owned the monopoly of medical care in the state. Cutting corners was their art form, skimping on everything except political contributions. That explained why their drug warehouse was located outside the pro-

tection of the corporate zone.

William ambled around the converted furniture warehouse, just another senior getting exercise. There was a bus stop across the street from the loading docks where he watched delivery vans come and go. The docks were within the building; creaking metal doors and scanning cameras protected them. Every hour, a guard inspected them.

Lunch hour he spent in a deli a block down. It was simple to pump an employee—obvious in her stark HMO uniform—about the Depository. The high value drugs were stored inside a walk-in refrigerator in the

basement.

William walked home deep in thought. Panting at the top of the steps, he leaned against his favorite pillar. The porch swing creaked. Dusk, combined with the wall of honeysuckle, made the figure in the swing a shadow within shadows. William blushed, despising that anyone witnessed him out of breath like an old man.

"We oughta build an escalator. Those steps are gonna kill somebody,"

drawled the man who once purchased Kentucky.

"Most folks use the basement door out back," replied William.

"But not you?"

"When you allow your body to dictate to you, that's when you are too

William dropped onto a fraved lawn chair to rub a throbbing knee.

"I want to help."

"With what, Grit Boy?"

"Beth won't tell me what's wrong, but I feel it. Beth said you wouldn't trust me." The ex-billionaire chuckled, a rusty sound. "Know why I bought Kentuck? My career was buying failing companies, turning them around, and selling 'em for big profit. I fixed things for a living. So when my home state went bankrupt, and the feds arrested Governor Letcher and the legislature for corruption, I said to myself, you can fix it. My state was so rich in every way except money. Five million folks, my folks, were trapped in a nightmare. It wasn't hard to convince Washington to sell me the Commonwealth government. Privatization, after all, was the buzzword of the administration."

William studied the runes of the shadows. "Is there a point to this his-

tory lesson?"

Bigg grunted at William's glower. "Y'all gave me a refuge when I had nothing. I want to help you fix whatever is wrong."

"Even if we can't win?"

The ex-magnate tugged his beard. "I'd rather try and fail than sit on my ass."

William said, "Yeah, you got to try."

"Gotta. It's what separates us from the losers."

"Rule Two: I'm in charge. Shave your beard, Lincoln Boy. You are a fugitive, behave like one—stop drawing attention to yourself."

The ex-billionaire stood and saluted. "When do I report for active duty, sir?"

"We leave tonight at two. I'm going to take a nap."

William entered the commune. Climbing the stairs to his bedroom was too daunting a task. Instead, he stretched across the couch.

"You can bail, if you want. No grudge," William grumbled as they fast-

stepped through a garbage-choked alley.

"I had to find 7,500 bureaucrats, honest and hardworking, overnight after I fired the entire state gov. That was hard. This is merely Bad Acting 101."

As they walked, the homeless appeared, looking like ghosts. Or were they ghosts looking homeless? A trio of thugs emerged from the shadows behind a mini-mart. William showed them his pistol. The thugs retreated.

They arrived at the fire station. Hiram Bigg started huffing and puffing until his pallid face colored. He raced around the corner into the fire station, gasping to a stop behind the fire trucks. A pair of firefighters popped out of the office to confront him.

"You can't come in here."

"I'm so glad to see you," said Bigg, his accent gone. "A bunch of punks

are chasing me."

William slipped into the station. The door to the office stood wide open. The computer on the desk purred. He tapped in the address of the Depository, holding his breath as the printer hummed to life.

"I just need a chance to catch my breath. I thought I was a goner,"

gasped Bigg.

William peeked through the window into the bay. The lanky Bigg leaned against the wall, hand to his cheek like a southern belle suffering from the vapors.

The printer clicked off. William stuffed the pages into his pocket. He

was walking out when a firefighter appeared.

"What are you doing here?"

William smiled broadly. "Thought I saw my buddy duck in here. We got separated. Told him we shouldn't walk anywhere near those Graduate Projects. Those kids are vicious."

The firefighter gave the office a quick once over. Seeing nothing disturbed, he threw a thumb over his shoulder. "He's back there. I was about

to call the cops."

"The police have real crime to deal with. I'll get him home safely."
"You two should know better than to be out this late." replied the fire-

man as he pushed William out of the office.

As they scurried home, William couldn't stop chuckling.

"Have I earned the right to know what's going on?" asked Bigg.

"The Fire Department's database contains the blueprints for every

READERS: If you are having problems finding Asimov's Science Fiction at your favorite retailer, we want to help. First let the store manager know that you want the store to carry Asimov's. Then send us a letter or postcard telling us the full name and address of the store (with street name and number, if possible). Write to us at: Asimov's Science Fiction, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Thank you!

structure in town. Knowing the layout of a burning building means life ordeath to them. To us. too."

"The floor plan to what?"

A thug stepped from the doorway of a burnt-out building. Bigg pretended to grab a pistol in his waistband. The thug threw up his hands before walking away.

William's finger snaked off the trigger of his pistol. "You're learning,

Grit Boy. Of course, the next step could be our ticket to prison."

"They serve good grits in prison," Bigg drawled.

Heat glowed from the walls, raising spectral scents of the scores of people, hundreds of pets, and countless meals of the house's past. The windows were open, but not a breeze stirred.

William and Doc Meyer sat at the puzzle table in the corner of the living room. A half-completed Monet scene in jigsaw pieces framed their touching fingertips. The rabbit herd thumped into the living room, then turned 180 degrees to charge up the stairs.

Bigg entered the sweating room. "I saw an air conditioner out back,"

Bigg said, wiping his brow. "Is it broke?"

"Nope, but it eats \$140 a day in electricity. We only turn it on when it hits a hundred."

Bigg tapped the Coca Cola thermometer on the wall as if ninety-eight

degrees wasn't bad enough. "And how is our good doctor?"
Meyer shook her head. Black hair plastered against her skull did not move. "I canvassed the 'hood this morn. Eight probable cases of TB-3 in the nascent stage. I think the Cooper elderhaus must have it bad; they

wouldn't allow me inside. Public Health will find out soon."
"Then what?" asked the ex-billionaire.

"You missed a lot while you were in prison," said William. "Pub Health will do door-to-door testing throughout the contaminated district. If you cannot prove you're being treated for the disease, they take you to Cough Camps. A one-way ticket."

"Benign neglect behind razor wire," added the doc through clenched

teetn

William flamed a joint, exhaling out the window beside his chair. "We're living in the age of camps—cough, conspiracy, every time you turn around the gov is creating a new waiting room for cents to die in. We can't win. And the sad truth is that I voted for most of this crap when I was younger."

"Who could have predicted rejuy, and the quantum leap in transplant tech? Who could have guessed 65 percent of the population could live beyond the century mark?" asked Meyer.

"You vote to screw the other guy, it'll boomerang right up yer ass every

time." observed the ex-billionaire.

"It might've worked," said Meyer. "If the Wall Street sharks hadn't stolen so much from us..."

"I thought you doctors had investment counselors to protect your goodies," said William, propelling a cloud of smoke over Meyer.

"I should have retired rich," she admitted. "But I got busted. Teach me to marry a junkie. I *had* to supply him. It worried me sick while he was

Not Worth a Cent 167

buying drugs on the street. And how was I rewarded? He was the primary witness for the prosecution. The DA made it sound like I was supplying the whole city. He walked. I went to prison."

"Ironic, don't you think?" William spoke as he inhaled. "I'm the only real criminal at this table, and I'm the only one who has never been busted."

"Irony is the primary industry of this century."

"You sure you know how to pick a lock?"

"Cork it, Grit Boy," William grumbled as he raked the door lock. The cheapie continued to defy him.

It had gone too smoothly downstairs, William fretted. They'd simply loitered outside the apartment building until a drunk couple weaved their car into the basement garage, then they strolled inside with their bulging

shopping bags before the security gate closed.

Frustrated, William reared back and kicked. The lock surrendered. They crossed the roof of the building. William secured a rope to the leg of an air purifier the size of a house, dropped it over the side onto the roof of the Depository. Before they went over, he handed Bigg a stick of gum.

"Minty and, in an emergency, it gives you something to spit in the face of a guard. That'll buy you an extra second to—" William allowed the

preposition to linger.

Bigg clambered down the rope with the brio of a teen.

"Show-off." William went down the rope slowly. It wouldn't do, he thought, to break a leg.

The lock on the Depository's roof door was a hundred times more complex than the last; it took William less than a minute to pick it. Another twenty minutes vanished as he rewired the alarm system. Donning knap-

sacks, they abandoned the empty shopping bags.

At the first floor, William ordered Bigg to wait. Producing a short section of lead pipe, he went hunting. The guard sat at his desk, consuming a hoagie. William pulled the first blow, a mistake. Had to strike the guard three more times. He stole the guard's keys, wallet, and revolver before handcuffing the man to the desk, yanking the telephone wires as an afterthought. Finished the hoagie while returning to Bigg.

In the basement, William handed a crowbar and a flashlight to Bigg. "Lookit, when I yell, you snap open the cage door, walk directly to the

walk-in fridge, snap its lock. One, two, three.

"What are you going to do?"

"Set off every alarm in the world, if I'm wrong,"

William went down a dank corridor to a storage room. The circuit box stood on the wall, right where the floor plan said. He opened it, studied the chart on the door, and threw three switches. The lights died. William shouted. Turning on his flashlight, he returned. The hillbilly attacked the

fridge, ripping the handle clean off the door.

William pushed Bigg away, reached inside the handle hole to twist the bar inside. The door opened as its interior light flickered on. The fridge had its own auxiliary power. Brownouts were all too common; nobody would risk ruining millions of dollars worth of perishable drugs.

The question was whether the alarm was wired into the auxiliary power. And, if so, how long would it take to reset.

From his knapsack came an insulated bag filled with bubble wrap. The

racks were in alphabetical order.

He went to the "L" shelf, loading boxed vials of toxin, plenty for everyone on Franklin Street.

"Our job here is done, Grit Boy."

"We've won the big game."

"Nobody wins."
"We did"

"We did."

As they raced up the steps, William was appalled he had to stop to catch his breath. "If anything happens to me, take the knapsack and run." "Billy." Anythel Birs. "More appearance it."

"Billy," drawled Bigg, "we're gonna make it."

They hit the front door. William wiped his brow as he inserted the key into the lock. "Just saunter. Nonchalant. And take those damned gloves off as soon as we hit the street."

Hot air slapped them as they strolled down Fourth Street. Only one in ten streetlights shone. Out of nowhere appeared a prowl car. It hit the duo with its snotlight.

The ex-billionaire tensed. "What's she doing here?" he hissed.

Their attention riveted on the ancient Volvo station wagon parked across the street. Smoke puffed from its tailpipe. Doc Meyer slumped be-

hind the wheel, trying to look casual.

William paled. The prowl car thumped onto the sidewalk, coming to a stop abreast of them. A patrolman stepped from the car. William frisbeed the lead pipe across his forehead. The cop went down. The driver hopped out, drawing his weapon. William rolled across the hood of the car, screaming as he kicked the cop's handgun.

Bigg froze. His bloodshot eyes widened until it appeared they would explode from his face. Even when a bullet screamed past his ear. Hiram

Bigg did not move.

The driver staggered as William rammed his skull into the cop's face. His weapon jerked downwards. Two bullets smashed the interior of the cruiser. The cop leveled his weapon, yelping when he saw a shell casing

jamming his semi-auto.

William drew the security guard's revolver, thumbed back its hammer. The cop dropped his weapon and fled. The first cop regained his feet, first get wo shots into William's chest. Bigg threw himself against the man, who ricocheted off the prowl car, bouncing right into Bigg's fists. His left lashed out with a six pack of blows, capped by a textbook right. The cop went down for the count.

"The knapsack!" The ex-billionaire raced around the cruiser, jerking the precious cargo off William's back, snapping one of the straps in his haste. Halfway across the street, he froze again. A forest of distant flashing blue lights approached down the broad boulevard. Without thinking, ancient first-down instincts threw the backpack. He turned, not bothering to watch the knapsack sail through the Volvo's open window and smack Doc Mever in the face.

The Volvo sputtered and lurched, nearly stalling before the doctor

zipped into a parking lot. Sparks flew as she jumped a curb and scraped into an alley.

Bigg tensed, thinking about fleeing in the opposite direction to draw the police away from Beth. Instead, he decided to see if his partner needed first aid

The body wasn't on the street.

"Billy!" he yelled. Then froze again. The sirens, the blue lights were overwhelming.

The prowl car squealed from the curb. William rolled down the window, throwing out a fistful of wires "Hey Grit Boy up for a ride"

Bigg darted around the car and jumped through the open door. The acceleration nearly threw him out before he got it shut. "But you were shot. You..."

A phalanx of police cars loomed in front of them. William yelled as they lanced through their ranks. Metal screamed as he sideswiped cruisers; he yelled all the louder as he twisted the wheel. Bigg hit the roof, leaving a dint when they thumped onto the sidewalk, plowing down topiaries as they crossed a park. The windshield shattered when they tore through a mesh fence. The vehicle vibrated madly as William took them onto railroad tracks.

They came to an abrupt stop. "Out, out, out!" screamed William, kicking Bigg to speed him. Shifting into neutral, he wedged a baton against the accelerator, hopped out, and banged it into drive. The battered cruiser bounced down the tracks.

The duo rolled down the gravel slope of the elevated track. The roar of a helicopter and its probing spotlight spied them under a tree. A flood of yowling police cars thumped down the tracks in hot pursuit of the stolen cruiser.

ng ponce cars thumped down the tracks in not pursuit of the stolen cruiser.

"How badly shot are you?" Bigg asked after dragging the wheezing

William most of the way.

"Cracked some ribs," William wheezed. "I wore my Kevlar vest. Geez, the sales brochure didn't tell me a hit would hurt this bad."

"I can't believe we escaped. We won. We won big!"

"You grit-brained hick, we're page one sociopaths, FBI fugitives with a bullet. Prowl cars have a full sensor array. It filmed everything we did from the second the spotlight hit us until I gutted the system. We'll be news at eleven."

"Oh," was all Bigg said.

"We can't go back to the commune."

"But they don't know I live there," said the ex-billionaire, shrinking into the shadows.

"John Law doesn't know where I live either. But the neighbors know. One of them will sell us out. Mannn, we can't win."

"The vaccine got to the doc."

"Okay, our street won." William laughed. The outburst bent him double with pain. "But we lost. Well, pard, we're going on a road trip. I'll leave it up to you to decide our destination."

The ex-billionaire stood. Shadows made him ten feet tall. "I hear Vegas is good for gambling men like us."

"Throw the dice. Grit Boy."

# THE KING'S

#### Constance Cooper

Constance Cooper tells us, "I live in the San Francisco Bay Area with my husband, two cats, and an awesome baby daughter who is currently inspiring lots of story ideas while at the same time delaying their execution. In my past lives, I've worked as a linguistic researcher, a software engineer, and a balloon twister (and I can still make a pretty mean Starship

(and I can still make a pretty mean starsnip Enterprise.)" Constance's short stories have appeared in Abyss & Apex, Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine, Black Gate, and Mythic Delirium, but the author's new story of schemes within schemes on an alien planet is her first professional sale. You can learn more about her work at http://constance.bierner.org.

he king's tail had nearly grown back.

It was the only thing that showed him the passage of time, here in this prison burrow. Each time they fed him, before he settled back into his troubled sleep, he curled his body and drew his jewel-scaled snout down the length of his stump. His tail was long by now, and plump with fat, the end tapering to a tip. That meant it had been almost another year. Soon

the Hunters' warlord would send for him again.

It felt good to be nearly whole, though the healing had been more difficult this time. The new tail held no bone, only cartilage, and the king could feel a thickened ring where the old flesh joined the new. The Prophet had spoken truth when she said, "Regeneration is for the careless young." In the darkness of the burrow he could not see skin markings, but he hoped that at least the bands of yellow and black would be of undiminished brilliance.

The king cocked his head. The scuff and scritch of blunt-clawed feet far down the tunnel announced the coming of yet another meal. His captors gave him ample food and water to speed the healing process. Most weeks there were redchick eggs. and groundbird meat, and sometimes a haunch

of herdbeast.

Now and then they starved him by bringing the flesh of one of his own people, but despite the stench from the latrine pit he had never yet failed to recognize Cthars meat.

At least, he prayed that he had not.

On one occasion—he flinched to remember it—the invaders had brought him Cthara eggs. Warm, fertilized eggs, likely ripped just that day from the hatching burrow of some poor herder family. It had been the greatest challenge the Creator had ever sent him. His fangs had unfolded without his conscious will, and only a lifetime of piety and self-control had kept him from sinking them into the small bodies of the terrified guards.

His venom had dripped onto the filthy floor, and after the guards left he had lain shuddering in the dampness, feeling the leathery eggs by his flank gradually cool and die. Over and over he repeated the litany of the Prophet: "People shall not sink fang into other speaking people. People shall not sink fang into other speaking people shall not make

war...

They had never brought Cthara eggs again. The king would have liked to think that the Hunters had learned from his example, but in his darker moments he suspected that the guards were just too frightened to comply with their orders. For all he knew they hid their disobedience by con-

suming the eggs themselves in some deserted tunnel end.

There had been days, especially after his failed escape, when the king had longed for death. But his duty would not allow it. Without his example to guide them, what might become of his people? They were already dispirited enough, their herds and flocks thinned by the invaders, their very bodies subject to the warlord's appetite. How much worse if they should give up all hope, forget the words of the Prophet, and become no better than their oppressors!

"Sire!" A frightened voice hissed from outside the door. "Are you there?"
What was this? The guards always arrived in pairs, and this youngster
sooke with the accent of the Cthara! Cautiously the king poked his snout.

through the grating in the door.

This was no Hunter. The scent was of a young male Cthara, and he stood at Cthara height—the king's flicking tongue had felt the smooth wall of his chest. Despite their ferocity, Hunters stood only half the height of Cthara even with their legs stiffened to the limit.

"I am here," the king told the young Cthara, trying to keep the serene

tone appropriate to a descendant of the Prophet.

"I'm Dorn, sire, of the Redrock clan. We have to hurry, the guards won't be distracted long." There was a grinding noise as the young male started shaving wedges of wood from one of the thick wooden bars with a flint knife. Heart pounding, the king hoped no one had used such things against the Hunters. Since his grandfather's time, the People had believed that sinking sharp tools into a speaking person was morally equivalent to sinking fang.

The whittled bars broke under Dorn's strong shoulder, and the king shuffled out into the passage, the first time he had left his cell in a year. "Follow me, sire," Dorn gasped, and trundled off down the tunnel, paus-

ing only to let the king catch up.

The king remembered his previous escape attempt and his logic told him not to hope, that this was just another trick to demoralize him. The other escape had been an obvious setup in retrospect, a gap in the circle of guards that had lured him into a pathetic dash for freedom. It had been a public spectacle, a cruel "lesson" to cow the People. At the same time it was a morale-builder for the Hunters, who were, after all, only a few dozen strangers in a foreign valley.

Still, here one of his own people had penetrated all the way into the prison levels. And it was early for the warlord to repeat his victory cere-

mony-the king's tail was not fully regrown.

The king wheezed as he struggled upward, his unused muscles burning, his tender soles tearing on the flagstones of the passageway. They reached the upper burrows of the palace complex, where airshafts brought streaks of sun onto the floor, and the king squinted in pain.

"Sire, we must hurry," Dorn urged. "A supply wagon is standing ready to smuggle you out of the city. But the driver will look suspicious if he

waits too long."

They emerged into a spacious loading area, so bright the king was blinded. His heart pounded as young Dorn helped him into a wagonbed and stretched a stained tarp over the top. The wagon smelled of rotting herdbeast meat, but, after the fug of his prison chamber, the enclosed air seemed as fresh as new rain.

The wagon lurched and the king gripped the planking with all his toes and fingers. The underside of his tail felt raw as it slid against the gritty surface. Above him the wagon cover was a bright brown sky. He lay dizzy,

blinking, still not quite able to hope.

The hooves of the towbeasts clashed on gravel, and later clopped on packed dirt. They were out of the city now. This was farther than he had gotten before, much farther.

Suddenly there came the pitter of running feet behind the wagon, and a

piping Hunter's voice called out. "Halt! Halt for the Guard!"

The wagon jolted forward, and the hoofbeats sped up, but the king knew that towbeasts could never outrun a Hunter.

But Cthara could.

The king pushed up on the tarp, thrusting his shoulders through the gap at the front. The lanky Cthara driver was looking anxiously behind at a group of four green-belted Hunters now close enough to breathe the wagon's dust. "We'll have to run, sire!" he shouted. "There's a river ahead—we can lose them there!" Sure enough, a fringe of green loomed up before them.

"We will run," said the king. He made his voice a command. "Do not

wait for me."

The king clambered onto the driver's platform and dropped down to the road, landing so heavily that for a moment he couldn't breathe. The tow-beasts careered by, wagon wheels dangerously close. The driver was already to the trees.

The king began clumsily to run, his flabby legs protesting every step. There had been barely room to turn around in his cell. But at this moment, the sense of hope that had eluded him even in the wagon roared

aloud, and he gloried in it. They hadn't caught him yet! Surely even a weak, broken-down Cthara could outpace these short-legged Hunters!

The sunlight blazed on his black and yellow skin, and he ran, ignoring the pain of torn muscles and bleeding feet. He showed the drab brown

Hunters the glory of his jeweled tail.

He was almost to the river when the flint blades of their spears pinned him to the ground. The pain flared hot—but it was only in his tail! With a feeling of exhilaration, the king surged forward to the water, letting the vertebrae part in the way that only the escape instinct could truly trigger. His tail, still impaled by the spears, tore off and flapped behind him like a black and yellow fish.

like a black and yellow fish.

Then another line of guards rose up from the reeds at the shore like a dusty wall. The king's chest thudded into the ground, and he paddled his feet to stop from running into the snouts and spearpoints of the Hunters.

"Hello again, your Majesty," a red-belted guard greeted him sarcasti-

cally. "Hope springs eternal, eh?"

The king panted until he could reply with dignity. "I suppose it does,"

he said. "I truly didn't think I could be tricked again."

"Well, cowardice will always out." This was clearly meant more for the other guards. "Think of it! A king who won't turn and fight!" The other guards twitched their nostrils and swaggered. Deliberately, the head guard leaned forward and plunged his fangs into the king's neck.

They paraded him back to the city in the wagon, his severed tail roped and hung from a pole like a blood-streaked banner. The same Cthara drove the towbeasts, controlling them with short, savage jerks of the reins. The king wanted to tell him that he didn't blame him, he knew the driver and Dorn must only be protecting their families, but the toxin held him paralyzed.

They brought the king to the banquet place as they had the year before. The warlord crouched on his dais, surrounded by downcast Cthara servants, surveying the Hunters arrayed before him. The guards ceremoniously placed the king's tail on a platter, and dumped the king's limp body beside it so all could see the tail was his. Then they took their places for

Cthara with sickened expressions watched from the outer circle-

heads of families, craftmasters, elders.

The warlord hissed for attention, opening his mouth far enough to reveal his small, childlike fangs.

"Once more we see who is truly strong, and who is weak; who fights, and who runs. We see who hunts, and who herds; who rules, and who submits

"Twenty-six warriors came with me to this fat land. We met an enemy who at first seemed fearsome, with huge heavy bodies and long fangs. They numbered in the hundreds. Yet my twenty-six loyal warriors yet live—live and rule! Can this be anything but destiny?"

In the back row, a burly Cthara was trembling with rage. The king could see his skin flushing orange, his nostrils all aflare. Would he challenge the warlord? Would he betray his heritage?

"No enemy, indeed, but only servants," the warlord declared. "The proof

of this we see before us. Let the feasting begin! Any Cthara who feels wor-

thy of the name of warrior, let him join us!'

The king saw that the orange-flushed Cthara had closed his eyes, and was mumbling a prayer. As the Hunters tore into the warm, fatty tail meat, not a single Cthara stepped forward. The king sent his silent gratitude to the Creator. No Cthara would defile himself today.

The Hunters mocked his people for not using their strong muscles and venomous fangs in combat. Because they themselves were puny, needing weapons to bring down their prey, they didn't understand the damage such power unleashed could bring. They didn't know the history of this valley, the days when clan fought clan. If they truly understood what they

mocked, they would tremble.

The king knew, for instance, that the Hunters were hardly venomous at all. Last year, the numbness from the guard's bite had lasted barely an hour. These Hunters with their disdain for herding had obviously never visited a farm and seen a young Cthara learning to gauge its strike. It was easy to slaughter a herdbeast instantly. To paralyze it temporarily, or numb an injured area for treatment, took finesse.

No, the Hunters did not dream of how lethal the Cthara really were. They had no legends of the monstrous predators, now extinct, who had once roamed the valley and tested the early Cthara's defenses. In the two years of the occupation, no Cthara had ever sunk fang into a Hunter, even

under the worst provocation.

When the king thought of this, he felt very proud.

He thought of his people often during his captivity, and this past year the thought had brought him comfort every day when he sank his fangs

into the soft underside of his own tail.

He hadn't known if it would work. Even though it was his own venom, and thus harmless to himself in normal quantities, toward the end his tail had become agonizingly tender, and at times he felt so ill from the accumulated toxins that he wondered if he could even manage an escape attempt. Even if he did, would he be able to believe the warlord's clumsy setup a second time? Would he be able to feel the escape instinct strongly enough to release his tail?

In that, thank the Creator, he had succeeded. Now he would see how powerful Cthara venom really was. Injected into the bloodstream, such quantities would be lethal to anyone not of his clan. Taken orally, of course, venom was weak, but if the concentration was high enough... and the hunters, though still speaking people, were only the most distant

of kin. .

The king watched as the warlord and his twenty-six chewed down gob-

bets of his beautiful lost tail.

One by one, the Hunters drooped their heads. They swayed, and then toppled until their gore-slimed chins rested on the bloody ground. Not

dead, the king rejoiced, but fully paralyzed.

The Cthara spectators watched cautiously, then whistled with dawning delight. With herders' efficiency, they moved in to truss the Hunters with their own belts. The captives would be well treated in the prison burrows, he would see to that. And they would not escape. O

The King's Tail 175

## THE WALLS OF THE UNIVERSE

#### Paul Melko

Paul lives in Ohio in Universe #7621 with his beautiful wife and three children, the third a very recent addition. He was born in Universe #7271, but was kidnapped by a crazed version of himself and forced to write thinly disguised Harry Potter novels until he escaped by clocking the other Paul on the head with the complete manuscript of *Harry Potter and the Poorly Tuned Piano*. #7621 is not so bad, but he misses the Ultra Jojopops from his old universe that came in virimo and ommerdoge flavors.

The screen door slammed behind John Rayburn, rattling in its frame. He and his dad had been meaning to fix the hinges and paint it before winter, but just then he wanted to rip it off and fling it into the fields.

"Johnny?" his mother called after him, but by then he was in the dark shadow of the barn. He slipped around the far end and any more of his mother's calls were lost among the sliding of cricket legs. His breath blew from his mouth in clouds.

John came to the edge of the pumpkin patch, stood for a moment, then plunged into it. Through the pumpkin patch was east, toward Case Institute of Technology where he hoped to start as a freshman the next year. Not that it was likely. There was always the University of Toledo, his father had said. One or two years of work could pay for a year of tuition there.

He kicked a half-rotten pumpkin. Seeds and wispy strings of pumpkin guts spiraled through the air. The smell of dark earth and rotten pumpkin reminded him it was a week before Halloween and they hadn't had time to harvest the pumpkins: a waste and a thousand dollars lost to earthworms. He ignored how many credits that money would have bought.

The pumpkin field ended at the tree line, the eastern edge of the farm.
The trees—old maples and elms—abutted McMaster Road, beyond which
was the abandoned quarry. He stood in the trees, just breathing, letting

the anger seep away.

It wasn't his parents' fault. If anyone was to blame, it was him. He hadn't had to beat the crap out of Ted Carson. He hadn't had to tell Ted Carson's mom off. That had entirely been him. Though the look on Mrs. Carson's face had almost been worth it when he told her her son was an asshole. What a mess

He soun at the sound of a stick cracking

For a moment he thought that Ted Carson had chased him out of the farmhouse, that he and his mother were there in the woods. But the figure who stood there was just a boy, holding a broken branch in his hand.

"Johnny?" the boy said. The branch flagged in his grip, touching the

ground.

John peered into the dark. He wasn't a boy; he was a teenager. John stepped closer. The teen was dressed in jeans and plaid shirt. Over the shirt he wore a sleeveless red coat that looked oddly out of date.

His eyes lingered on the stranger's face. No, not a stranger. The teen had his face.

ad *nis* race

"Hey, Johnny. It's me, Johnny."

The figure in the woods was him.

John looked at this other John, this John Subprime, and decided he would be the one. He was clearly a Johnny Farmboy, not one of the Johnny Rebels, not one of the Broken Johns, so he would be wide-eyed and gullible. He'd believe John's story, and then John could get on with his life.

"Who . . . who are you?" Johnny Farmboy asked. He was dressed in jeans and a shirt, no coat.

John forced his most honest smile. "I'm you, John."

"What?"

Johnny Farmboy could be so dense.

"Who do I look like?"
"You look like..."

"I look just like you, John. Because I am you." Johnny Farmboy took a step back, and John continued. "I know what you're thinking. Some trick. Someone is playing a trick on the farmboy. No. Let's get past that. Next you're going to think that you were twins and one of them was put up for adoption. Note. It's much more interesting than that."

Johnny Farmboy crossed his arms. "Explain it, then."

"Listen, I'm really hungry; I could use some food and a place to sit down. I saw Dad go in the house. Maybe we can sit in the barn, and I can explain everything."

John waited for the wheels to turn.

"I don't think so," Johnny Farmboy finally said.

"Fine. I'll turn around and walk away. Then you'll never get to hear the story."

John watched the emotions play across Farmboy's face. Typically skeptical, he was debating how full of crap this wraith in the night was, while desperately wanting to know the answer to the riddle. Farmboy loved puzzles.

Finally his face relaxed. "Let's go to the barn," he said.

The stranger walked at his side, and John eased away from him. As they walked through the pumpkin patch, John noted that their strides matched. John pulled open the back door of the barn, and the young man entered ahead of him, tapping the light switch by the door.

"A little warmer," he said. He rubbed his hands together and turned to

John.

The light hit his face squarely, and John was startled to see the uncanny match between them. The sandy hair was styled differently and was longer. The clothes were odd; John had never worn a coat like that. The young man was just a bit thinner as well. He wore a blue backpack, so fully stuffed that the zipper wouldn't close all the way. There was a cut above his eye. A bit of brown blood was crusted over his left brow, clotted but recent.

He could have passed as John's twin.

"So, who are you?"

"What about a bite of something to eat?"

John went to the horse stall and pulled an apple from a bag. He tossed it to the young man. He caught it and smiled at John.

"Tell the story, and I might get some dinner from the house."

"Did Dad teach you to be so mean to strangers? I bet if he found me in the woods, he'd invite me in to dinner."

"Tell," John said.

"Fine." The young man flung himself on a hay bale and munched the apple. "It's simple, really. I'm you. Or rather I'm you genetically, but I grew up on this same farm in another universe. And now I've come to visit myself."

"Bullshit. Who put you up to this?"

"Okay, okay. I didn't believe me either." A frown passed over his face. "But I can prove it. Hold on a second." He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Here we go: That horse is named Stan or Dan. You bought him from the McGregors on Butte Road when you were ten. He's stubborn and willful and he hates being saddled. But he'll canter like a show horse if he knows you have an apple in your pocket." He turned to the stalls on his left. "That pig is called Rosey. That cow is Wilma. The chickens are called Ladies A through F. How am I doing so far?" He smiled an arrogant smile.

"You stale same of your uncle's cigarettes when you were twelve and smoked them all. You killed a big bullfrog with your BB gun when you were eight. You were so sickened by it you threw up and haven't used a gun since Your first kiss was with Amy Walder when you were fourteen She wanted to show you her underwear too, but you ran home to Mommy. I don't blame you. She's got cooties everywhere I go.

"Everyone calls you Johnny but you prefer John You have a stash of Playboys in the barn loft. And you burned a hole in the rug in your room once. No one knows because you rearranged your room so that the night stand is on top of it." He spread his arms like a gymnast who'd just struck

a landing.

"Well? How close did I come?" He smiled and tossed the apple core into Stan's stall

"I never kissed Amy Walder." Amy had gotten pregnant when she was fifteen by Tyrone Biggens, She'd moved to Montana with her aunt and hadn't come back. John didn't mention that everything else he'd said was tmia

"Well, was I right?"

John nodded, "Mostly."

"Mostly? I nailed it on the head with a hammer, because it all happened to me. Only it happened in another universe."

How did this guy know so much about him? Who had he talked to? His parents? "Okay, Answer this, What was my first cat's name?"

"Snowball"

"What is my favorite class?"

"Physics."

"What schools did I apply to?"

The stranger paused, frowned, "I don't know,"

"Why not? You know everything else."

"I've been traveling, you know, for a while. I haven't applied to college vet, so I don't know. As soon as I used the device, I became someone different. Up till then, we were the same," He looked tired, "Listen, I'm you, but if I can't convince you, that's fine. Let me sleep in the loft tonight and then I'll leave'

John watched him grab the ladder, and he felt a twinge of guilt at treating him so shabbily. "Yeah, you can sleep in the loft. Let me get you some dinner. Stay here. Don't leave the barn, and hide if someone comes. You'd give my parents a heart attack."

"Thanks, John."

John watched Farmboy disappear through the door into the night, shuddering and then exhaling. He hadn't even come to the hard part yet.

It would have been so easy to kill Farmboy, a blow to the back of the head, and it was his. But John wouldn't do that. He hoped, not yet. He was desperate, but not willing to commit homicide. Or would it be suicide?

He chuckled grimly to himself. Dan the Man nickered in response.

John took an apple from the basket and reached out to the horse. Suddenly his eyes were filled with tears.

"Hold yourself together, man," he whispered as he let Dan gingerly

He'd taken Dan riding and had tried for the fence beyond the back field. They had flown. But Dan's hind left hadn't cleared it. The bone had broken and John ran sobbing to his farm.

His father met him halfway, a rifle in his hand, his face grim. He'd seen

"Dan's down!" John cried.

His father nodded and handed the rifle to him

John took it blankly, then tried to hand it back to his father.

"No!"

"If the leg's broken, you must."

"Maybe..." But he stopped. Dan was whinnying shrilly; he could hear it from where they stood. The leg had been horribly twisted. There was no doubt.

"Couldn't Dr. Kimble look at him?"

"How will you pay for that?"

"Will you?"

His father snorted and walked away.

John watched him trudge back to the house until Dan's cries became too much for him. He turned then, tears raining down his cheeks.

Dan's eyes were wide. He shook his head heavily at John, then he settled when John placed the barrel against his skull. Perhaps he knew.

John fished an apple from his pocket and slipped it between Dan's teeth.

The horse held it there, not biting, waiting. He seemed to nod at John.
Then John had pulled the trigger.

The horse had shuddered and fallen still. John sank to the ground and

But here he was Alive. He rubbed Dan's muzzle.

"Hello, Dan, Back from the dead," John said, "Just like me."

His mother and father stopped talking when the door slammed, so he knew they'd been talking about him.

"I'm gonna eat in the barn," he said. "I'm working on an electronics experiment."

He took a plate from the cabinet and began to dish out the lasagna. He filled the plate with enough to feed two of him.

His father caught his eye, then said, "Son, this business with the Carson boy..."

John slipped a second fork into his pocket, "Yeah?"

"I'm sure you did the right thing and all." John nodded at his father,

saw his mother look away.

"He hates us because we're farmers and we dig in the dirt." His mother
lifted her apron strap over her neck, hung the apron on a chair, and

slipped out of the kitchen.
"I know that, Johnny...John. But sometimes you gotta keep the

John nodded. "Sometimes I have to throw a punch, Dad." He turned to go.

"John, you can eat in here with us."

"Not tonight, Dad."

Grabbing a quart of milk, he walked through the laundry room and left out the back door.

"Stan never lets anyone do that but me."

John turned from rubbing Dan's ears. "Just so," he said. He took the proffered paper towel full of lasagna, dug into it with the extra fork Farmboy had fetched.

"I always loved this lasagna. Thanks."

Farmboy frowned, and John recognized the stubbornness; he did the same thing when presented with the impossible. He decided to stay silent and stop goading him with the evidence. This John needed a softer touch.

John ate in silence while Farmboy watched, until finally he said, "Let's assume for a moment that you are me from another universe. How can

you do it? And why you?"

Through a mouthful of pasta, he said, "With my device, and I don't know."

"Elaborate," John said, angry.

"I was given a device that lets me pass from one universe to the next. It's right here under my shirt. I don't know why it was me. Or rather I don't know why it was us."

"Stop prancing around my questions!" Farmboy shouted. "Who gave

you the device?"

"I did!" John grinned.

"One of us from another universe gave you the device."

"Yeah. Another John. Nice looking fellow." So far all he had said was the

Farmboy was silent for a while, his lasagna half-eaten. Finally he said, "I need to feed the sheep." He poured a bag of corn into the trough. John lifted the end of it with him. "Thanks." They fed the cows and the horse afterwards, then finished their own dinner.

Farmboy said, "So if you are me, what do I call you?"

"Well, John won't work, will it? Well, it will if there's just the two of us, but as soon as you start adding the infinite number of Johns out there . . . . how about John Prime?"

"Then who gave you the device?"

"Superprime," John Prime said with a smile. "So do you believe me yet?"

Farmboy was still dubious. "Maybe."

"All right. Here's the last piece of evidence. No use denying this." He pulled up his pant leg to reveal a long white scar, devoid of hair. "Let's see yours," John said, pushing down his panic. The last time he'd tried this, it hadn't been there.

Farmboy looked at the scar, and then pulled his jeans up to the knee. The cold air of the barn drew goose bumps on his calf everywhere except

the puckered flesh of his own identical scar.

When John Prime had been twelve, he and Bobby Walder had climbed the barbed wire fence of old Mrs. Jones to swim in her pond. Mrs. Jones had set the dogs on them, and they'd had to run naked across the field, diving over the barbed wire fence. John hadn't quite cleared it. Bobby had run off, and John had limped home. The cut on his leg had

required three dozen stitches and a tetanus shot.

"Now do you believe?" John Prime asked.

John stared at the scar on his leg. "I believe. Hurt like hell, didn't it?" "Yes," John Prime said with a grin. "Yes, it did, brother."

John sat in the fishbowl-the glass-enclosed room outside the principal's office-ignoring the eyes of his classmates and wondering what the hell John Prime was up to. He'd left his twin in the barn loft with half his lunch and an admonition to stay out of sight.

"Don't worry," he'd said with a smirk, "Meet me at the library after

school."

"Don't let anyone see you, all right?"

John Prime had smiled again.

"John?" Principal Gushman stuck his head out of his office. John's

stomach dropped; he was never in trouble.

Mr. Gushman had a barrel chest, balding head, and perpetual frown. He motioned John to a chair and sat behind the desk, letting out his breath heavily as he sat. He'd been a major in the Army, people said. He liked to be strict. John had never talked with him in the year he'd been principal.

"John, we have a policy regarding violence and bullying."

John opened his mouth to speak.

"Hold on. Let me finish. The facts of the matter are these. You hit a classmate—a younger classmate—several times in the locker room. He required a trip to the emergency room and stitches." He opened a file on his desk.

"The rules are there for the protection of all students. There can be no violence in the school. There can be no exceptions. Do you understand?"

John stared, then said, "I understand the rule. But-"

"You're a straight-A student, varsity basketball and track. You're wellliked. Destined for a good college. This could be a blemish on your record." John knew what the word "could" meant. Gushman was about to offer

him a way out.

"A citation for violence, as stated in the student handbook, means a three-day suspension and the dropping of any sports activities. You'd be off the basketball and track teams.

John's throat tightened.

"Do you see the gravity of the situation?"

"Yes," John managed to say.

Gushman opened another folder on his desk. "But I recognize this as a special case. So if you write a letter of apology to Mrs. Carson, we'll drop the whole matter." Gushman looked at him, expecting an answer.

John felt cornered. Yes, he had hit Ted, because he was a prick. Ted needed hitting, if anyone did; he had dropped John's clothes in the urinal. He said, "Why does Mrs. Carson want the letter? I didn't hit her. I hit Ted "

"She feels that you showed her disrespect. She wants the letter to address that as well as the violence."

If he just wrote the letter, it would just all go away. But he'd always know that his mother and Mrs. Carson had squashed him. He hated that. He hated any form of defeat. He wanted to tell Gushman he'd take the suspension. He wanted to throw it all in the man's face.

Instead, he said, "I'd like to think about it over the weekend if that's

okay."

Mr. Gushman's smile told John that he was sure he'd bent John to his will. John went along with it, smiling back. "Yes. You may. But I need a decision on Monday."

John left for his next class.

John walked past the librarian, his Toledo Meerkats cap low over his face. He didn't want to be recognized as John Rayburn. At least not yet. The reference section was where he expected it to be, which was a relief. If the little things were the same he had hope for the bigger things. He'd tried living in the weird places, but sooner or later something tripped him up and he had to run.

He needed a place like what he remembered, and so far, this place

seemed pretty close.

He reached for the almanac. Sure an encyclopedia had more information, but he could be lost in the details for hours. All he needed was a gross comparison.

He ran his finger down the list of presidents, recognizing all of them. He already knew this wasn't a world where Washington served four terms and set a standard for a king-president serving life terms. Turning the page, he found the next twenty presidents to be the same until the last four. Who the hell was Bill Clinton?

The deviation was small, even so. It had to be, he was so tired of run-

ning.

John found a quiet table, opened his backpack, and began researching.

The city library was just a couple of blocks from the school. John wandered through the stacks until he found John Prime at the center study desk in a row of three on the third floor. He had a dozen Findlay *Heralds* spread out, as well as a couple of books. His backpack was open, and John saw that it was jammed with paper and folders.

To hide his features, John Prime wore a Toledo Meerkats baseball hat and sunglasses. He pulled off his glasses when he saw John, and said,

"You look like crap. What happened to you?"

"Nothing. Now what are you doing? I have to get back to the school by

five. There's a game tonight."

"Yeah, yeah," yeah." John Prime picked up the history book. "In every universe I've been in, it's always something simple. Here George Bush raised taxes and he never got elected to a second term. Clinton beat him in '91." He opened the history book and pointed to the color panel of American Presidents. 'In my world, Bush never backed down on the taxes thing, and the economy took off and he got elected to his second term.

He was riding even higher when Hussein was assassinated in the middle of his second term. His son was elected in 1996."

John laughed, "That joker?"

John Prime scowled. "Dubya worked the national debt down to nothing. Unemployment was below 3 percent."

"It's low here too. Clinton did a good job."

John Prime pointed to a newspaper article he had copied. "Whitewater? Drug use? Vince Foster?" He handed the articles to John, then shook his head. "Never mind. It's all pretty much irrelevant anyway. At least we didn't grow up in a world where Nixon was never caught."

"What happened there?"

"The Second Depression usually. Russia and the US never coming to an arms agreement. Those are some totalitarian places." He took the articles back from John. "Are there Post-It notes in this world?"

"Yes. Of course."

John Prime shrugged. "Sometimes there aren't. It's worth a fortune, And so simple." He pulled out his notebook. "I have a hundred of them." He opened his notebook to a picture of the MTV astronaut. "MTV?"

"Yep."

"The World Wide Web?"

"I think so."

"Rubik's Cube?"

"Never heard of it."

John Prime checked the top of the figure with a multi-colored cube. "Ah ha, That's a big money maker."

"It is?"

He turned the page. "Dungeons and Dragons?"

"You mean that game where you pretend to be a wizard?"
"That's the one, How about Lozenos? You got that here?"

"Never heard of it. What is it?"

"Candy. South African diamond mines?"

They worked through a long list of things, about three-quarters of which John had heard of, fads, toys, or inventions.

"This is a good list to work from. Some good money makers on this."

"What are you going to do?" John asked. This was his world, and he didn't like what he suspected John Prime had in mind.

John Prime smiled. "There's money to be made in interdimensional trade"

"Interdimensional trade?"

"Not in actual goods. There's no way I can transport enough stuff to make a profit. Too complicated. But ideas are easy to transport, and what's in the public domain in the last universe is unheard of in the next. Rubik sold one hundred million Cubes. At ten dollars a cube, that's a billion dollars." He lifted up the notebook. "There are two dozen ideas in here that made hundreds of millions of dollars in other worlds."

"So what are you going to do?"

John Prime smiled his arrogant smile. "Not me. We. I need an agent in this world to work the deals. Who better than myself? The saying goes that you can't be in more than one place at a time. But I can." "Uh huh."

"And we split it fifty-fifty."

"Uh huh."

"Listen. It's not stealing. These ideas have never been thought of here. The people who invented these things might not even be alive here."

"I never said it was stealing," John said. "I'm just not so sure I believe

John Prime sighed. "So what's got you so down today?"

John said, "I may get suspended from school and kicked off the basketball and track teams."

"What? Why?" John Prime looked genuinely concerned.

"I beat up a kid, Ted Carson. His mother told my mother and the principal. They want me to apologize."

John Prime was angry. "You're not gonna, are you? I know Ted Carson. He's a little shit. In every universe."

"I don't have a choice."

"There's always a choice." John Prime pulled a notebook out of his bag.

"Ted Carson, huh? I have something on him."

"John looked over his shoulder at the notebook. Each page had a newspaper clipping, words highlighted and notes at the bottom referencing other pages. One title read, "Mayor and Council Members Indicted." The picture showed Mayor Thiessen yelling. Another article was a list of divorces granted. John Prime turned the page and pointed. "Here it is. Ted Carson picked up for torturing a neighbor's cat. Apparently the boy killed a dozen neighborhood animals before getting caught." He glanced at John.

"I've never heard anything about that."

"Then maybe he never got caught here."

"What are we going to do with that?" John asked. He read the article, shaking his head.

"Grease the gears, my brother," He handed John a newspaper listing of

"Why?"

"It's the best place to figure out who's sleeping with who. That usually doesn't change from one universe to the next. Speaking of which, how does Casey Nicholson look in this universe?"

"What?"

"Yeah. Is she a dog or a hottie? Half the time she's pregnant in her junior year and living in a trailer park."

"She's a cheerleader," John said.

John Prime glanced at him and smiled. "You like her, don't you? Are we dating her?"

"No!"

"Does she like us?"

"Mel Not us," John said. "And I think so. She smiles at me in class."
"What's not to love about us?" He glanced at his watch. "Time for you to head over to the school. isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"I'll meet you at home tonight. See va."

"Don't talk to anyone," John said. "They'll think it was me. Don't get me in trouble"

"Don't worry. The last thing I want to do is screw up your life here."

"Casey, Casey, Casey," John thought as he watched Johnny Farmboy depart. Casey Cheerleader was the best Casey of all. She smelled so clean. And it was all wasted on Johnny Farmboy.

He had planned on working until the library closed, but the idea of seeing Casey was overwhelming. He halfheartedly perused a few microfiched newspapers, then packed his things up and headed for the school.

Once again he was hit with nostalgia as he walked through the small Findlay downtown. He had spent his entire life in this little town—well, not this particular town. For a moment he wanted to run into Maude's Used Books and rummage through the old comic books. But the counter

clerk would surely recognize him. Not yet, he thought.

The junior varsity team was playing when he reached the high school stadium. He found a seat at the top of the bleacher and made sure his ball cap covered his face. The sun was just dipping below the far end zone, casting long violet shadows as the JV teams—Findlay High was playing Gurion Valley—moved the ball haphazardly up and down the field. Watching the shadows was more interesting.

But then the game was over, and the stands were filling. He recognized faces, year old memories, but still vivid. He shrank down on the bench, nulled up the collar on his ski coat. Then he laughed at himself, Always

hiding, always running. Not this time.

The varsity cheerleaders came on the field. He spotted Casey immediately and he felt a spurt of hormones course through him. Across universes held come for her he thought. How was that for a nickun line?

Goddamn, she was beautiful. He stood to get a better look.

"Hey. John!" someone shouted, two rows down.

John looked at him, shocked. He had no idea who he was. A wave of doubt shook him. He'd been gone a year; how much had he missed in that time?

"Hey."

"Shouldn't you be down with the team? I thought you were keeping stats."

"Yeah. I was just going."

John took the bleacher steps two at a time, nearly running. He had things to do before he could gawk at Casey.

After the game John left a copy of the stats with Coach Jessick and

then met his father in the parking lot.

"Not a good game for the home team," his father said. He wore his overalls and a John Deere hat. John realized he'd sat in the stands like that, with manure on his shoes. Soft country and western whispered tinnily from the speakers. For a moment he was embarrassed, then he remembered why he'd had to fight Ted Carson.

"Thanks for picking me up, Dad."

"No problem." He dropped the truck into gear and pulled it out of the lot. "Odd thing. I thought I saw you in the stands."

John glanced at his father, forced himself to be calm. "I was down keeping stats."

"I know, I saw. Must be my old eyes, playing tricks."

Had John Prime not gone back to the barn? What was that bastard doing to him?

"Gushman called."

John nodded in the dark of the cab. "I figured."

"Said you were gonna write an apology."

"I don't want to," John said. "But....

"I know. A stain on your permanent record and all." His father turned the radio off. "I was at the U in Toledo for a semester or two. Me and college didn't get along much. But you, son. You can learn and do something interesting with it. Which is really what me and your mother want."

"Dad-"

"Hold on a second. I'm not saying what you did to the Carson boy was wrong, but you did get caught at it. And if you get caught at something, you usually have to pay for it. Writing a letter saying something isn't the same as believing it."

John nodded. "I think I'm gonna write the letter, Dad."

His father grunted, satisfied. "You helping with the apples tomorrow? We wait any longer and we won't get any good ones."

"Yeah, I'll help until lunch. Then I have basketball practice."

"Okay."

They sat in silence for the remainder of the trip. John was glad his father was so pragmatic.

As they drove up to the farmhouse, John considered what he was going to do about John Prime.

"Where are you?"

John paused in his scanning of the newspaper and gripped a shovel. It might have come to violence anyway; Johnny Farmboy looked pissed.

"Up here."

"You went to the football game," he accused as he climbed the ladder.
"Just for a bit."

"My dad saw you."

"But he didn't realize it was me, did he?"

Farmboy's anger faded a notch. "No, no. He thought he was seeing things."

"See? No one will believe it even if they see us together."

Farmboy shook his head. He grunted.

John added, "This Ted Carson thing is about to go away."

"What do you mean?"

"A bunch of cats have gone missing over there."

"You went out in public and talked to people?"

"Just kids. And it was dark. No one even saw my face. Three cats this month, by the way. Ted is an animal serial killer. We can pin this on him and his mom will have to back off."

"I'm writing the letter of apology," Farmboy said.

"What? No!"

"It's better this way. I don't want to screw up my future."

"Listen. It'll never get any better than this. The kid is a psychopath and

we can shove it in his parents' faces!"

"No. And listen. You have got to lay low. I don't want you wandering around town messing up things," Farmboy said. "Going to the library to-day was too much."

John smiled. "Don't want me hitting on Casey Nicholson, huh?"

"Stop it!" He raised his hand. "That's it. Why don't you just move on? Hit the next town or the next universe or whatever. Just get out of my life!"

John frowned. It was time for the last shot. He lifted up his shirt. Under his grey sweatshirt was a shoulder harness with a thin disk the diameter of a softball attached at the center. It had a digital readout which said 7533, three blue buttons on the front, and dials and levers on the sides.

John began unstrapping the harness and said, "John, maybe it's time you saw for yourself."

John looked at the device. It was tiny for what it was supposed to do. "How does it work?" he asked. John envisioned golden wires entwining black vortices of primal energy, x-ray claws tearing at the walls of the uni-

verse as if they were tissue.

"I don't know how it works," John Prime said, irritated. "I just know how to work it." He pointed to the digital readout. "This is your universe number."

"Seventy-five thirty-three?"

"My universe is 7433." He pointed to the first blue button. "This increments the universe counter. See?" He pressed the button once and the number changed to 7534. This one decrements the counter." He pressed the second blue button and the counter flipped back to 7533. He pointed to a metal lever on the side of the disk. "Once you've dialed in your universe, you pull the lever and—Pow!—you're in the next universe."

"It looks like a slot machine." John said.

John Prime pursed his lips. "It's the product of a powerful civilization."

"Does it hurt?" John asked.

"I don't feel a thing. Sometimes my ears pop because the weather's a little different. Sometimes I drop a few inches or my feet are stuck in the dirt."

"What's this other button for?"

John Prime shook his head. "I don't know. I've pressed it, but it doesn't seem to do anything. There's no owner's manual, you know?" He grinned.

"Wanna try it out?"

More than anything, John wanted to try it. Not only would he know for sure if John Prime was full of crap, but he would get to see another universe. The idea was astounding. To travel, to be free of all this... detritus in his life. Ten more months in Findlay was a lifetime. Here in front of him was adventure.

"Show me."

John Prime frowned. "I can't. It takes twelve hours to recharge the de-

vice after it's used. If I left now, I'd be in some other universe for a day before I could come back."

"I don't want to be gone a day! I have chores. I have to write a letter."

"It's okay. I'll cover for you here."

"No way!"

"I can do it. No one would know. I've been you for as long as you have."

"No. There's no way I'm leaving for twelve hours with you in control of

John Prime shook his head. "How about a test run? Tomorrow you're doing what?"

"Picking apples with my dad."

"I'll do it instead. If your dad doesn't notice a thing, then you take the trip, and I'll cover for you. If you leave tomorrow afternoon, you can be back on Sunday and not miss a day of school." John Prime opened his backpack wider. "And to make the whole trip a lot more fun, here's some spending money." He pulled out a stack of twenty dollar bills.

"Where did you get that?" John had never seen so much money. His

hank account had no more than three hundred dollars in it

John Prime handed him the stack of cash. The twenties were crisp, the paper smooth-sticky. "There's got to be two thousand dollars here." "Yen."

"It's from another universe, isn't it? This is counterfeit."

It's real money. And no one in this podunk town will be able to tell me that it's not." John Prime pulled a twenty out of his own pocket. "This is from your universe, See any differences?"

John took the first twenty off the stack and compared it to the crum-

pled bill. They looked identical to him.

"How'd you get it?"

"Investments." John Prime's smile was ambiguous.

"Did you steal it?"

John Prime shook his head. "Even if I did steal it, the police looking for it are in another universe."

John felt a twinge of apprehension. John Prime had his fingerprints, his looks, his voice. He knew everything there was to know about him. He could rob a bank, kill someone, and then escape to another universe, leaving John holding the bag. All the evidence of such a crime would point to him, and there was no way he could prove that it wasn't him.

Would he do such a thing? John Prime had called John his brother. In a sense they were identical brothers. And John Prime was letting John use his device, in effect stranding him in this universe. That took trust.

"Twenty-four hours." John Prime said. "Think of it as a vacation. A

break from all this shit with Ted Carson."

The lure of seeing another universe was too strong. "You pick apples with my father tomorrow. If he doesn't suspect anything, then maybe I'll take the trin."

"You won't regret it. John."

"But you have got to promise not to mess anything up!" John Prime nodded. "That's the last thing I'd want to do, John." "Damn, it's early," John said, rubbing the straw from his hair.

"Don't let my dad hear you cursing," Johnny Farmboy said.

"Right, no cursing." John stood, stretching. "Apple picking? I haven't done that . . . in a while." It had been a lot longer than a year. His own father hadn't bothered with the orchard in years.

John peered out a small window. Farmboy's father was already out

there with the tractor.

"What's up between you and your dad? Anything heavy?" John asked. Johnny Farmboy took off his coat and handed it to John, taking John's in return.

John shook his head. "We talked last night about the Carson thing. He

wanted me to write the letter."

"So that's it. What about your mother?"

"She was pissed with me before. She still may be. We haven't talked since Thursday."

"Anything happening this afternoon?" John Prime took a pencil out and started jotting things down.

"Nothing until tomorrow. Church, then chores. Muck the stalls. Homework, But I'll do that."

"What's due for Monday?"

"Reading for Physics. Essay for English on Gerard Manley Hopkins. Problem set in Calculus. That's it."

"What's your class schedule like?"

Farmboy began to tell him, but then said, "Why do you need to know that? I'll be back."

"In case someone asks."

"No one's gonna ask." As Farmboy pulled John's ski jacket on, he looked through his binoculars. "Ill watch from here. If anything goes wrong, you pretend to be sick and come back to the barn. You'll brief me and then we switch back."

John Prime smiled, "Nothing's gonna happen, Relax," He pulled on

gloves and climbed down the ladder. "See ya at lunch."

With more trepidation than he showed, John walked out to the orchard. He cast one glance over his shoulder and saw Farmboy watching him through binoculars. This was a test in more ways than one. He could still run. He could still find another bolthole.

His father barely glanced at him, said, "How bout we start this end?"

"Okay," John said, his throat dry. His father stood tall, and when he walked past he smelled of dirt, not booze. He walked up to a tree and turned to look at him.

"Well? Come on."

John gripped a branch and pulled himself into the tree. The rough bark cut his hands through the gloves. His foot missed a hold, and he slipped.

"Careful there."

"I'm getting too big for this," John said.

"Next year, I'll have to hire someone to help me."

John paused, words of banter on his lips. He smiled. "I bet mom could do it."

His father laughed. "Now there's a thought."

John felt a twinge of jealousy as he watched his father laugh at John Prime's joke. He wondered what John Prime had said to make his father laugh. Then he realized that if his father was laughing at John Prime's

jokes, there was no danger of being found out.

The precarious nature of his situation bothered him. Effectively, John Prime was him. And he was . . . nobody. Would it be that hard for someone to slip into his life? He realized that it wouldn't. He had a few immediate relationships, interactions that had happened within the last few weeks that were unique to him, but in a month, those would all be absorbed into the past. He had no girlfriend. No real friends, except for Erik, and that stopped at the edge of the court. The hardest part would be for someone to pick up his studies, but even that wouldn't be too hard. All his classes were a breeze, except Advanced Physics, and they were starting a new module on Monday. It was a clear breaking point.

John wondered what he would find in another universe. Would there be different advances in science? Could he photocopy a scientific journal and bring it back? Maybe someone had discovered a unified theory in the other universe. Or a simple solution to Fermat's Last Theorem. Or . . . but what could he really do with someone else's ideas? Publish them under his own name? Was that any different than John Prime's scheme to get rich with Rubik's Square, whatever that was? He laughed and picked up his physics book. He needed to stay caught up in this universe. They were starting Quantum Mechanics on Monday, after all.

John brought Johnny Farmboy a sandwich.

"Your mom didn't notice either."

He took the sandwich, pausing to look John in the eye. "You look happy." John started. His clothes were covered in sap. His hands were cut and raw. His shoulders ached. He had always loathed farm work. Yet . . .

"It felt good. I haven't done that in a while."

Around a bite of sandwich, Farmboy said, "You've been gone a long time."

"Yeah," John said. "You don't know what you have here. Why do you even want to go to college?"

Farmboy laughed. "It's great for the first fifteen years, then it really begins to drag."

"I hear you."

Farmboy handed John his ski jacket. "What will I see in the next uni-

John's heart caught. "So you're gonna take me up on the offer?" he said

"Yeah, I think so. Tell me what I'll see."

"It's pretty much like this one, you know. I don't know the exact differences."

"So we're in the next universe?"

"Yeah. I wouldn't try to meet him or anything. He doesn't know about us."

"Why'd you pick me to talk to? Why not some other me? Or why not all of us?"

"This is the most like home," John said. "This feels like I remember."

"In one hundred universes this is the one that is most like yours? How different are we from one to the next? It can't be too different."

"Do you really want to hear this?"

Farmboy nodded.

"Well, there are a couple types of us. There's the farm boy us, like you and me. Then there's the dirt bag us."

"Dirt bag?"

"Yeah. We smoke and hang out under the bleachers."

"What the hell happened there?"

"And sometimes we've knocked up Casey Nicholson and we live in the low income houses on Stuart. Then there's the places where we've died." "Died?"

"Yeah, Car accidents, Tractor accidents, Gun accidents, We're pretty

lucky to be here, really."

Farmboy looked away, and John knew what he was thinking. It was the time he and his father had been tossing hay bales and the pitchfork had fallen. Or it was the time he had walked out on old Mrs. Jones' frozen pond, and the ice had cracked, and he'd kept going. Or the time the quarry truck had run him off the road. It was a fluke really that either of them was alive.

Finally Farmboy said, "I think I'm ready. What's the plan?"

John Prime lifted up his shirt and began unbuckling the harness. "You leave from the pumpkin field. Select the universe one forward. Press the toggle. Spend the day exploring. Go to the library. F'gure out what's different. If you want, write down any money-making ideas you come across." When he saw Farmboy's face, John added, "Fine. Then don't. Tomorrow, flip the counter back to this universe and pull the lever. You'll be back for school on Monday."

"Sounds easy enough."

"Don't lose the device! Don't get busted by the police! Don't do anything to draw attention to yourself."

"Right."

"Don't flash your money either. If anyone recognizes you, go with it and then duck out. You don't want to make it hot for our guy over there." "Right."

"Johnny, you look a little nervous. Calm down. I'll keep you covered on this end." John slapped him on the back, then handed him the harness.

Farmboy pulled off his shirt and shivered. He passed the two bands of the harness over his shoulders, then connected the center belt behind his back. The disk was cold against his belly. The straps looked like a synthetic material.

"It fits."

"It should," John said. "I copied some of my materials for you in case you need them." John Prime pulled a binder from his own bag, opened it to show him pages of clippings and notes. "You never know. You might need something. And here's a backpack to hold it all in."

John felt a twinge pass through him. He was powerless. The device was out of his control.

"What's wrong?" Farmboy asked.

"I haven't been away from the device in a long time. It's my talisman, my escape. I feel naked without it. You gotta be careful with it."

"Hey," John said. "I'm leaving my life in your hands. How about a little

two-way trust?"

John smiled grimly. "Okay. Are you ready? I've got 12:30 on my watch. Which means you can return half an hour past midnight. Okay?"

John checked his watch. "Okay."

"Toggle the universe."

John lifted the shirt and switched the number forward to 7534. "Check."

"Okay. I'll watch from the loft." John climbed the ladder, then turned. "Make sure no one sees you."

His heart was racing. This was it. It was almost his. He looked down from the barn window, waved.

from the parn window, waved.

Farmboy waved back, then he lifted up his shirt. Sunlight caught the brushed metal of the device.

Farmboy hesitated.

"Go!" John whispered. "Do it."

Farmboy smiled, pulled the switch, and disappeared.

John's ears popped and his feet caught in the dirt. He stumbled and fell forward, catching himself on his gloved hands. He wasn't in a pumpkin patch anymore. Noting the smell of manure, he realized he was in a cow pasture.

He worked his feet free. His shoes were embedded an inch into the earth. He wondered if there was dirt lodged in his feet now. It looked like the dirt in the current universe was an inch higher here than in the old one. Where did that extra inch of dirt go? He shook his feet and the dirt fell free.

It worked! He felt a thrill. He'd doubted to the last second, but here he

was, in a new universe.

He paused, John Prime had said there was a John in this universe. He spun around. Cows grazed contentedly a few hundred yards away, but otherwise the fields were empty, the trees gone. There was no farmhouse.

McMaster Road was there and so was Gurney Road. John walked from the field, hopped the fence, and stood at the corner of the roads. Looking to the north toward town, he saw nothing but a farmhouse maybe a mile up the road. To the east, where the stacks of the GE plant should have been, he saw nothing but forest. To the south, more fields.

John Prime had said there was a John Rayburn in this universe. He'd said that the farm was here. He'd told John he'd been to this universe.

John pawed up his jacket and shirt and tried to read the number on the device. He cupped his hand to shield the sun and read 7534. He was where he expected to be, according to the device. There was nothing here.

The panic settled into his gut. Something was wrong. Something had gone wrong. He wasn't where he was supposed to be. But that's okay, he

thought, calming himself. It's okay. He walked to the edge of the road and sat on the small berm there.

Maybe John Prime had it wrong; there were a lot of universes and if all

of them were different that was a lot of facts to keep straight.

He stood, determined to assume the best. He'd spend the next twelve hours working according to the plan. Then he'd go back home. He set off for town, a black mood nipping at his heels.

John watched his other self disappear from the pumpkin field and felt his body relax. Now he wouldn't have to kill him. This way was so much better. A body could always be found, unless it was in some other universe. He didn't have the device, of course, but then he'd never need it again. In fact he was glad to be rid of it. John had something more important than the device; he had his life back.

It had taken him three days of arguing and cajoling, but finally Johnny Farmboy had taken the bait. Good riddance and goodbye. He had been that naive once. He'd once had that wide-eyed gullibility, ready to explore new worlds. There was nothing out there but pain. He was alive again. He had parents again. He had money—\$125,000. And he had his notebook. That was the most important part. The notebook was worth a billion dollars right there.

John looked around the loft. This would be a good place for some of his money. If he remembered right, there was a small cubbyhole in the rafters on the south side of the loft. He found it and pulled out the bubble

gum cards and slingshot that was hidden there.

"Damn farmboy."

He placed about a third of his money in the hiding place. Another third he'd hide in his room. The last third, he'd bury. He wouldn't deposit it like he'd done in 7489. Or had that been 7490? The cops had been on his ass so fast. So Franklin had been looking the wrong way on all those bills. He'd lost \$80.000.

No, he'd be careful this time. He'd show legitimate sources for all his cash. He'd be the talk of Findlay, Ohio as his inventions started panning out. No one would suspect the young physics genius. They'd be jealous, sure, but everybody knew Johnny Rayburn was a brain. The Rubik's Cube—no, the Rayburn's Cube—would be his road to fame and riches.

John reached the outskirts of town in an hour, passing a green sign that said "Findlay, Ohio. Population 6232." His Findlay had a population in the twenty thousand range. As he stood there, he heard a high-pitched whine grow behind him. He stepped off the berm as a truck flew by him, at about forty-five miles per hour. It was in fact two trucks in tandem pulling a large trailer filled with gravel. The fronts of the trucks were flat, probably to aid in stacking several together for larger loads, like a train with more than one locomotive. The trailer was smaller than a typical dump truck in his universe. A driver sat in each truck. Expecting to be enveloped in a cloud of exhaust, John found nothing fouler than moist air.

Flywheel? he wondered. Steam?

Despite his predicament, John was intrigued by the engineering of the

trucks. Ten more minutes of walking, past two motels and a diner, he came to the city square, the Civil War monument displayed as proudly as ever, cannon pointed toward the South. A few people were strolling the square, but no one noticed him.

Across the square was the courthouse. Beside it stood the library, identical to what he remembered, a three-story building, its entrance framed by grantic linas reclining on brick pedestals. There was the place to start

figuring this universe out.

The library was identical in layout to the one he knew. John walked to the card catalog—there were no computer terminals—and looked up the numbers for American history. On the shelf he found a volume by Albert Trey called US History and Heritage: Major Events that Shaped a Nation. He sat in a low chair and paged through it. He found the divergence in moments.

The American Revolution, War of 1812, and Civil War all had the expected results. The presidents were the same through Woodrow Wilson. World War I was a minor war, listed as the Greco-Turkish War. World War II was listed as the Great War and was England and the US against Germany, Russia, and Japan. A truce was called in 1956 after years of no resolution to the fighting. Hostilities had flared for years until the eighties when peace was declared and disarmament accomplished in France, which was split up and given to Germany and Spain.

But all of those things happened after Alexander Graham Bell developed an effective battery for the automobile. Instead of an internal combustion engine, cars and trucks in this universe used electric engines.

That explained the trucks: electric engines.

But even as he read about the use of zeppelins for transport, the relatively peaceful twentieth century, his anger began to grow. This universe was nothing like his own. John Prime had lied. Finally, he stood and found the local telephone book. He paged through it, looking for Rayburns. As he expected, there were none.

He checked his watch; in eight hours he was going back home and kick-

ing the crap out of John Prime.

His mother called him to dinner, and for a moment he froze with fear. They'll know, he thought. They'll know I'm not their son.

Breathing slowly, he hid the money back under his comic book collection in the closet.

"Coming!" he called.

During dinner he kept quiet, focusing on what his parents mentioned, filing key facts away for later use. There was too much he didn't know. He

couldn't volunteer anything until he had all his facts right.

Cousin Paul was still in jail. They were staying after church tomorrow for a spaghetti lunch. His mother would be canning and making vinegar that week. His father was buying a turkey from Sam Riley, who had a flock of twenty or so. The dinner finished with homemade apple pie that made the cuts on his hands and the soreness in his back worth it.

After dinner he excused himself. In his room he rooted through Johnny Farmboy's bookbag. He'd missed a year of school; he had a lot of make-up

to do. And, crap, an essay on Gerard Manley Hopkins, whoever the heck

By the time the library closed, John's head was full of facts and details about the new universe. There were a thousand things he'd like to research, but there was no time. He stopped at a newspaper shop and picked an almanac off the shelf. After a moment's hesitation, he offered to buy the three-dollar book with one of the twenties John Prime had given him. The counter man barely glanced at the bill and handed John sixteen dollars and change. The bills were identical to those in his own world. The coins bore other faces.

He ate a late dinner at Eckart's cafe, listening to rockabilly music. None of it was familiar music, but it was music that was playable on the country stations at home. Even at ten in the evening, there was a sizeable crowd, drinking coffee and hard liquor. There was no beer to be had.

It was a tame crowd for a Saturday night. He read the almanac and listened in to the conversations around him. Most of it was about cars, girls.

and guys, just like in his universe.

By midnight, the crowd had thinned. At half-past midnight, John walked into the square and stood behind the Civil War statue. He lifted his shirt and toggled the number back to 7533.

He paused, checked his watch and saw it was a quarter till one. Close

enough, he figured.

He pressed the button.

Nothing happened.

He managed to get through church without falling asleep. Luckily the communion ritual was the same. If there was one thing that didn't

change from one universe to the next, it was church.

He expected the spaghetti lunch afterwards to be just as boring, but across the gymnasium, John saw Casey Nicholson sitting with her family. That was one person he knew where Johnny Farmboy stood with. She liked him, it was clear, but Johnny Farmboy had been too clean-cut to make a move. Not so for him. John excused himself and walked over to her.

"Hi, Casey," he said.

She blushed at him, perhaps because her parents were there.

Her father said, "Oh, hello, John. How's the basketball team going to do

this year?"

John wanted to yell at him that he didn't give a rat's ass. But instead he smiled and said, "We'll go all the way if Casey is there to cheer for us."

Casey looked away, her face flushed again. She was dressed in a white Sunday dress that covered her breasts, waist, and hips with enough material to hide the fact that she had any of those features. But he knew what was there. He'd seduced Casey Nicholson in a dozen universes at least.

"Tm only cheering fall sports, John," she said softly. "I play field hockey in the spring."

John looked at her mother and asked, "Can I walk with Casey around the church grounds, Mrs. Nicholson?"

She smiled at him, glanced at her husband, and said, "I don't see why

not."

"That's a great idea," Mr. Nicholson said.

Casey stood up quickly, and John had to race after her. She stopped after she had gotten out of sight of the gymnasium, hidden in the alcove where the rest rooms were. When John caught up to her, she said, "My parents are so embarrassing."

"No shit," John said.

Her eyes went wide at his cursing, then she smiled.

"I'm glad you're finally talking to me," she said.

John smiled and said, "Let's walk." He slipped his arm around her waist, and she didn't protest.

There was no sensation of shifting, no pressure change. The electric car

in the parking lot was still there. The device hadn't worked.

He checked the number: 7533. His finger was on the right switch. He

tried it again. Nothing.

It had been twelve hours. Twelve hours and forty-five minutes. But maybe John Prime had been estimating. Maybe it took thirteen hours to recharge. He leaned against the base of the statue and slid to the ground.

He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. John Prime had lied to him about what was in Universe 7534. Maybe he had lied about the recharge time. Maybe it took days or months to recharge the device. And when he got back, he'd find that John Prime was entrenched in his life.

He sat there, trying the switch every fifteen minutes until three in the morning. He was cold, but finally he fell asleep on the grass, leaning

against the Civil War Memorial.

He awoke at dawn, the sun in his eyes as it streamed down Washington Avenue. He stood and jumped up and down to revive his body. His back ached, but the kinks receded after he did some stretches.

At a donut shop off the square, he bought a glazed and an orange juice with the change he had left over from the almanac. A dozen people filed in over the course of an hour to buy donuts and coffee before church or work. On the surface, this world was a lot like his.

John couldn't stand the waiting. He walked across the square and climbed the library steps and yanked at the door. They were locked, and he saw the sign showing the library's hours. It was closed until noon.

John looked around. There was an alcove behind the lions with a bench. No one would easily see him from the street. He sat there and tried the

device. Nothing.

He continued to try the lever every ten or fifteen minutes. As he sat on the steps of the library, his apprehension grew. He was going to miss school. He was going to miss more than twenty-four hours. He was going to miss the rest of his life. Why wouldn't the device work like it was supposed to?

He realized then that everything John Prime had told him was proba-

bly a lie. He had to assume that he was the victim of John Prime's scheming, trapped in another universe. The question was how he would return to his life.

He had the device. It had worked once, to bring him from Universe 7534 to Universe 7534. It would not allow him to return because it wasn't recharged yet. It took longer than—he checked his watch—twenty hours to recharge the device, apparently.

He stopped. He was basing that logic on information he got from John Prime. Nothing that John Prime had said could be used as valid information. Only things that John had seen or gotten from a valid source were true. And John Prime was not a valid source.

The twelve hour recharge time was false. He had assumed that it meant the length of time was what was false in John Prime's statement.

What if there was no recharge time at all?

There were two possibilities that John could see. First, there was no recharge time and he was being prevented from returning to his universe for some other reason. Second, the device no longer worked. Perhaps he

had used the last of its energy source.

For some reason he still wanted to believe John Prime. If it was simply a mechanical issue, then he could use intelligence to solve the problem. Maybe John Prime was truthful, and something happened to the device that he didn't know about. Maybe John Prime would be surprised when John never returned with the device, effectively trapping John Prime in John's life. John Prime might even think that John had stolen his device.

But mechanical failure seemed unlikely. John Prime said he had used the device one hundred times. His home universe was around 7433. If he'd used it exactly one hundred times, that was the distance in universe se between John's and John Prime's. Did that mean he only used the device to move forward one universe at a time? Or did he hop around? No, the numbers were too similar. John Prime probably moved from one universe to the next systematically.

John decided that he was just too ignorant to ignore all of John Prime's

information. Some of it had to be taken at face value.

The one hundred number indicated that John only incremented the universe counter upward. Why? Did the device only allow travel in one direction?

He played with the theory, fitting the pieces together. The device was defective or designed in such a way that only travel upward was allowed. John Prime mentioned the recharge time to eliminate any possibility of a demonstration. There was perhaps no recharge time. The device was of no value to John Prime, since he planned to stay. That explained the personal questions John Prime had asked; he wanted to ease into John's life. Some things he knew, but other things he had to learn from John.

The fury built in John.

"Bastard!" he said softly. John Prime had screwed him. He'd tempted him with universes, and John had fallen for it. And now he was in another universe, where he didn't exist. He had to get back.

There was nothing to do, he realized, but test the theory.

He pulled his backpack onto his shoulders and checked around the

bench for his things. Then, with a quick check to see if anyone was looking, he toggled the device to 7535 and pulled the lever.

He fell.

Monday morning at school went no worse than expected. John barely made it to homeroom, and ended up sitting with the stoners by accident. He had no idea what the word "Buckle" meant in the Hopkins poem. And Mr. Wallace had to flag him down for physics class.

"Forget which room it is?" he asked.

"Er

There was no Mr. Wallace in John's home universe, and he had to dodge in-jokes and history between him and Johnny Farmboy; the class was in-dependent study! John realized he'd have to drop it. He was grateful when a kid knocked on the door.

"Mr Gushman needs to see John Rayburn"

Mr. Wallace took the slip of paper from the acne-ridden freshman. "Again? Read the assignment for tomorrow, John. We have a lot to cover." The man was disappointed in him, but John couldn't find the emotion to care. He bardly knew him

John nodded, then grabbed his stuff. He nudged the freshman hall

monitor as they walked down the hall. "Where's Mr. Gushman at?"

The freshman's eye widened like marbles. "He's in the front office. He's

"No shit, douche bag," John said.

John entered the fish bowl and gave his name to the receptionist. After

just a few minutes. Mr. Gushman called him in.

John didn't have anything on Gushman. He'd come to Findlay High School in the time John had been away. The old principal had fucked a student at his old school and that had come out in one of the universes that John had visited. That bit of dirt would be no good in this universe.

"Have you got the letter of apology for Mrs. Carson?" he asked.

John suddenly realized what the meeting was about. He'd not written the letter.

"No, sir. I've decided not to write the letter."

Mr. Gushman raised his eyebrows, then frowned. "You realize that this

will have grave consequences for your future."

"No, I don't think so. In fact, I've contacted a lawyer. I'll be suing Ted Carson." John hadn't thought of doing that until that moment, but now that he'd said it, he decided it was a good idea. "I'm an honor student, Gushman. I'm a varsity player in two sports. There will be fallout because of this. Big fallout."

"it's Mr. Gushman, please. I'll have your respect." His knuckles were white, and John realized that Gushman had expected him to cave. Well, maybe Johnny Farmboy would have caved, but not him. He had dirt on the education board members. He had dirt on the mayor. This would be a slam dunk for him.

"Respect is earned." John said.

"I see. Shall I have your mother called or do you have transportation

"Home? Why?" John said.

"Your three day suspension starts right now." John had forgotten about that. He shrugged. Johnny Farmboy would have shit a brick at being expelled. To John, it didn't really matter.

"I can take care of myself."

"You are not allowed on school property until Thursday at noon. I'll be sending a letter home to your parents. I'll also inform Coach Jessick that you are off the roster for basketball and track."

"Whatever."

Mr. Gushman stood, leaning heavily on the desk. His voice was strained as he said, "I expected better of you, John. Everything I know about you says that you're a good boy. Everything I've seen since you walked in this door has made me reevaluate my opinions."

John shrugged again. "Whatever." He stood, ignoring Gushman's anger.

"We done here?"

"Yes. You are dismissed."

At least he didn't have to worry about learning basketball. And three days was enough time to get started on his plans. He smiled as he passed the receptionist, smiled at the dirtbags waiting in the office. This was actually working out better than he expected.

John's arms flailed and his left foot hit the ground, catching his weight. He grouned as his leg collapsed under him. He rolled across the grass.

Grass? he thought as the pain erupted in his knee. He sat up, rocking as he held his knee to his chest. He'd been on the steps of the library and now he was on a plain. The wind blew the smell of outside: dirt, pollen, clover.

He tried to stretch his leg, but the pain was too much. He leaned back, pulling off his backpack with one hand, and looked up at the sky, breath-

ing deeply. It hurt like hell.

The device had worked. He had changed universes again. Only this universe had no library, no Findlay, Ohio. This universe didn't seem to have anything but grass. He fell because the steps he'd been standing on weren't in the universe he was in now.

He checked the readout on the device. He was in 7535. He'd gone for-

ward one universe.

John looked around him, but didn't see anything through the greenyellow grass. It rustled in the wind, making sounds like sandpaper rub-

bing on wood.

John stood gingerly on his other leg. He was on a broad plain, stretching for a good distance in every direction. There were small groves of trees to the north and east. To the west and south, the grass stretched as far as he could see.

There was no library to use to figure out what was different in this universe. No humans at all, maybe. A Mayan empire? If he wanted to find

the differences, he'd have to do some field research.

He sat back down. No, he thought. He had to get back to his life. John Prime had some answers to give and a price to pay. It was Sunday afternoon. He still had half a day to figure out how to get back to his universe.

His knee was swelling, so he took off his coat and shirt. He ripped his Tshirt into long strips and used them to wrap his knee as tightly as possible. It wasn't broken, but he might have sprained it.

He took the sandwich that he had packed on Saturday from his backpack and unwrapped it. He finished it in several bites and rinsed it down with some of the water in his water bottle. The taste of the sandwich made him angry. John Prime was eating his food and sleeping in his bed. John wondered how he would feel punching someone who looked like him in the face. He decided that he could do it.

John spent the afternoon, nursing his knee and considering what he knew, what he thought he knew, and what John Prime had told him. The latter category he considered biased or false. What he knew, however, was growing.

Universe 7535 was the second one he'd visited. The device clearly still

worked. His going from 7534 to 7535 proved that.

It was also support for his theory that the device only allowed travel to universes higher in number than the one a traveler currently resided in. But not proof. Hypotheses required repeatable experimental proof. He'd used the device to move forward through two universes. He'd have to do it a couple more times before he was certain that that was the way the device worked.

He took a blade of grass and chewed on it. This was an unspoiled universe, he thought. Which gave him another piece of data. Universes sequentially next to each other could have little in common. John couldn't even begin to guess what had happened for a universe to not have North

America settled by the Europeans.

There'd been no library steps here, so he had fallen ten feet to the ground. More data: There was no guarantee that a man-made object in one universe would exist in the next. Nor even natural objects. Hills were removed or added by machines. Rivers were dammed and moved. Lakes were created. What would happen if he jumped to the next universe and the steps were there? Would he be trapped in the cement that formed the steps? Would he die of asphyxiation, unable to press the lever because he was encased in the library steps?

The thought of being entombed, blind and without air, horrified him. It

was no way to die.

He would have to be careful when he changed universes. He'd have to be as certain as possible that there was nothing solid where he was going. But how?

Movement caught his eye and he looked up to see a large beast walking in the distance. It was so tall he saw it from his seat in the grass. A cross between a rhinoceros and a giraffe, it munched at the leaves of a tree. It was grey with legs like tree limbs, a face like a horse. Leaves and branches gave way quickly to its gobbling teeth.

No animal like that existed in his universe.

John watched, amazed. He wished he had a camera. A picture of this beast would be a nice addition to his scrapbook. Would it be worth cash? he wondered.

Ponderously it moved to the next tree in the grove.

John looked around him with more interest. This was no longer a desolate North America. There were animals here that no longer existed in his timeline. This universe was more radically different than he could have imagined.

The wave of the grass to the west caught his attention. The grass bobbed against the wind, and he was suddenly alert. Something was in the grass not twenty yards from him. He realized that large herbivores meant large carnivores. Bears, mountain lions, and wolves could be roaming these plains. And he had no weapons. Worse still, he had a bum knee.

He looked around him for a stick or a rock, but there was nothing.

on.

Was the thing closer? he wondered. He glanced at the grass around

him. Why hadn't he thought of that earlier?

John felt beneath his shirt for the device. He glanced down and toggled the universe counter up one to 7536. But he dared not pull the lever. He could be under the library right now.

He looked around him, tried to orient himself. The library entrance faced east, toward the Civil War Memorial. If he traveled east two hundred feet, he'd be in the middle of the park and it was unlikely that anything would be in his way. It was the safest place he could think of to do the transfer.

Suppressing a groan he moved off in an easterly direction, counting his

steps.

At fifty-two steps he heard a sound behind him. A dog-like creature stood ten yards away from him in his wake in the grass. It had a dog's snout and ears, but its eyes were slit and its back was arched more like a cat's. It had no tail. Its fur was tan with black spots the size of quarters along its flank.

John froze, considering. It was small, the size of a border collie. He was

big prev and it may just have been curious about him.

"Boo-yah!" he cried, waved his arms. It didn't move, just stared at him

with its slit eyes. Then two more appeared behind it.

It was a pack animal. Pack animals could easily bring down an animal larger than a pack member. He saw three of them, but there could be a dozen hidden in the grass. John turned and ran.

The things took him from behind, nipping his legs, flinging themselves onto his back. He fell, his leg screaming. He felt weight on his back, so he let the straps of his backpack slide off. He crawled forward another yard. Hoping he'd come far enough, he pulled the lever on the device.

John took the two o'clock Silver Mongoose to Toledo, right after he stood in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles trying to convince the clerk to file the paperwork for his lost license.

"I am positive that it won't turn up," John said.

"So many people say that, and then there it is in the last place you look."

"Really. It won't."

"All righty, then. I'll take that form from you."

He was tempted to rent a car, but that would have raised as many eyebrows as hiring a patent lawyer in Findlay. John had to go to Toledo to get his business done. Three days off school was just about perfect.

As the northern Ohio farmland rolled by, he wondered how hurt he'd be if he had to transfer out right now. He was always considering his escape routes, always sleeping on the ground floor, always in structures that were as old as he could find. His chest itched where the device should have been. It was Johnny Farmboy's problem now. He was free of it. No one would come looking for him here. He blended right in. No police would come barging in at three AM No FBI agents wanting bis device.

What an innocent he'd been. What a piece of work. How many times had he almost died? How many times had he screwed up within inches of

the end?

For a moment, he had a twinge of guilt for the displaced John. He hoped that he figured out a few things quickly, before things went to hell. Maybe he could find a place to settle down just like he had. Maybe I should have written him a note. he thought.

Then he laughed to himself, Too late for that, Johnny Farmboy was on

his own Just like he had been

A car horn screeched and a massive shape bore down on him. John tried to scramble away, but his hand was stuck. As his wrist flexed the wrong way, pain shot up his arm.

He looked up, over his shoulder, into the grill of a car. John hadn't made it into the park. He was still in the street, the sidewalk a few feet in front

of him.

John got to his knees. His hand was embedded in the asphalt. He planted his feet and pulled. Nothing happened except pain.

"Buddy you okay?" The driver was standing with his door open. John's

eyes were just over the hood of the man's car.

John didn't reply. Instead he pulled again and his hand tore lose with a spray of tar and stones. The impression of his palm was cast in the asphalt.

The man came around his car and took John's arm. "You better sit down. I'm really sorry about this. You came outta nowhere." The man led him to the curb, then looked back and said, "Jesus. Is that your dog?"

John looked and saw the head and shoulders of one of the cat-dogs. The transfer had caught only half the beast. Its jaws were open, revealing yellowed teeth. Its milky eyes were glazed over. Blood from its severed torso flowed across the street. A strand of intestine had unraveled onto the pavement.

"Oh, man. I killed your dog," the motorist cried.

John said between breaths, "Not . . . my . . . dog. . . . Chasing me."

The man looked around. "There's Harvey," he said, pointing to a police

The man looked around. "There's Harvey," he said, pointing to a police officer sitting in the donut shop that John had eaten in that morning. Well, not the same one, John thought. This wasn't the same universe, since this car was gas powered.

"Hey, Harvey," he yelled, waving his arms. Someone nudged the police officer and he turned, looking at the blood spreading across the street.

Harvey was a big man, but he moved quickly. He dropped his donut and coffee in a trash can at the door of the shop. As he approached he brushed his hands on his pants.

"What happened, Roger?" he said. He glanced at John, who was too winded and too sore to move. He looked at the cat-dog on the street.

"What the hell is that?"

He kicked it with his boot.

"This young man was being chased, I think. I nearly clipped him and I definitely got that thing. What is it? A badger?"

"Whatever it is, you knocked the crap out of it." He turned to John.

"Son, you okay?"

"No," John said. "I twisted my knee and my wrist. I think that thing was rabid. It chased me from around the library."

"Well, I'll be," said the officer. He squatted next to John. "Looks like it got a piece of your leg." He lifted up John's pant leg, pointed to the line of

bite marks. "Son, you bought yourself some rabies shots."

The officer called Animal Control for the carcass and an ambulance for John. The white-uniformed Animal Control man spent some time looking for the other half of the cat-dog. To Harvey's questions about what it was, he shrugged. "Never seen nothing like it." When he lifted up the torso, John saw the severed arm straps of his backpack on the ground. He groaned. His backpack, with seventeen hundred dollars in cash, was in the last universe under the other half of the cat-dog.

A paramedic cleaned John's calf, looked at his wrist and his knee. She

touched his forehead gingerly. "What's this?"

"Ow," he said, wincing.
"You may have a concussion. Chased by a rabid dog into a moving car.
Quite a day you've had."

"It's been a less than banner day." John said.

"Banner day," she repeated. "I haven't heard that term in a long time. I think my grandmother said that."

"Mine too."

They loaded him into the ambulance on a stretcher. By the time the door had shut on the ambulance, quite a few people had gathered. John kept expecting someone to shout his name in recognition, but no one did. Maybe he didn't exist in this universe.

They took him to Roth Hospital, and it looked just like it did in his universe, an institutional building from the fifties. He sat for fifteen minutes on an examining table off of the emergency room. Finally, an older doctor

came in and checked him thoroughly.

"Lacerations on the palm. The wrist has a slight sprain. Minor. The hand is fine." Looking at John's knee, he added, "Sprain of the right knee. We'll wrap that. You'll probably need crutches for a couple days."

A few minutes later, a woman showed up with a clipboard. "We'll need

to fill these forms out," she said. "Are you over eighteen?"

John shook his head, thinking fast. "My parents are on the way." "Did you call them?"

"Yes."

"We'll need their insurance information."

John stood, wincing, and peered out the door until she disappeared. Then he limped the other way until he found an emergency exit door. He pushed it open and hobbled off into the parking lot, the bleating of the siren behind him.

The first lawyer John visited listened to him for fifteen minutes until she said she wasn't taking any new clients. John almost screamed at her,

"Then why did you let me blather on for so long?"

The second took thirty seconds to say no. But the third listened dubiously to his idea for the Rayburn Cube. He didn't even blink at the cash retainer John handed over for the three patents he wanted him to research and acquire.

He called Casey from his cheap hotel.

"Hev. Casev. It's John!"

"John! I heard you were expelled for a month."

"News of my expulsion has been greatly exaggerated."

"What happened?"

"Just more of the Ted Carson saga. I told Gushman I wasn't going to apologize, so he kicked me out of school. You should have seen the colors on his face."

"You told Gushman no?" she asked. "Wow. He used to be a colonel in the army."

"He used to molest small children too." said John.

"Don't say that."

"Why? He sucks."

"But it's not true."

"It could be true, probably is in some other universe."

"But we don't know for sure."

John switched subjects. "Listen, I called to see if you wanted to go out on Saturday."

"Yeah, sure," she said quickly. "Yeah."

"Movie?"

"Sounds good. What's playing?"

"Does it matter?"

She giggled. "No." After a moment, she added, "Didn't your parents ground you?"

"Oh, shit!"
"What?"

"They don't know yet," John said. He looked at the cheap clock radio next to the bed: six-thirty. "Shit."

"Do you think we can still go out?"

"One way or another, Casey, I'll see you on Saturday."

"I'm looking forward to it."

He hung up.

His parents. He'd forgotten to call his parents. They were going to be pissed. Damn. He'd been without them for so long, he'd forgotten how they worked.

He dialed his home number.

"Mom?"

"Oh, my God!" she yelled. Then to his father, she said, "Bill, it's John, It's John.

"Where is he? Is he all right?"

"Mom, I'm okay." He waited. He knew how Johnny Subprime would play this. Sure, he'd never have gone to Toledo, but John could play the suspension for all it was worth. "Did you hear from Gushman?"

"John, yes, and it's okay. We understand. You can come home. We aren't

angry with you."

Then, Mom, you know how I feel. I did the right thing, Mom, and they took everything away from me." It was what Farmboy would have said.

"I know, dear, I know,"

"It's not fair."

"I know, Johnny. Now where are you? You've got to come home." His mother sounded pitiful.

"I won't be home tonight, Mom. I've got things to do."

"He's not coming home, Bill!"

"Give me the phone, Janet." Into the phone, his father said, "John, I want you home tonight. We understand that you're upset, but you need to be home, and we'll handle this here, under our roof."

"Dad, I'll be home tomorrow."

"John-"

"Dad, I'll be home tomorrow." He hung up the phone and almost chortled. Then he turned on Home Theatre Office and watched bad movies until midnight.

John shivered in the morning cold. His knee was the size of a melon, throbbing from the night spent on the library steps. The bell tower struck eight; John Prime would be on his way to school right now. He'd be heading for English class. John hoped the bastard had done the essay on Gerard Manley Hopkins.

He'd slept little, his knee throbbing, his heart aching. He'd lost the 1700 dollars John Prime had given him, save eighty dollars in his wallet. He'd lost his backpack. His clothes were ripped and tattered. He'd skipped out on his doctor's bill. He was as far from home as he'd ever been.

He needed help.

He couldn't stay here; the hospital probably called the police on his unpaid bill. He needed a fresh universe to work in.

Limping, he walked across to the Ben Franklin's, buying new dunga-

rees and a backpack.

Then he stood in the center of the town square and waited for a moment when no one was around. He toggled the universe counter upward and pressed the lever.

"It turns this way, this way, and this way!" John made the motions with his hands for the fourth time, wishing again that he'd bought the keychain Cube when he'd had the chance.

"Why?" Joe Patadorn was the foreman for an industrial design shop, A pad of paper on his drafting board was covered in pencil sketches of

cubes. "Rotate against what? It's a cube."

"Against itself! Against itself! Each column and each row rotates."

"Seems like it could get caught up with itself."

"Yes! If it's not a cube when you try to turn it, it'll not turn."

"And this is a toy people will want to play with?" "I'll handle that part."

Joe shrugged. "Fine. It's your money."

"Yes, it is."

"We'll have a prototype in two weeks."

They shook on it.

His errands were finally done in Toledo. His lawyer was doing the patent searches and Patadorn was building the prototype. If he was lucky. he could have the first batch of Cubes ready to ship by Christmas, perfect timing.

From the bus stop, he hiked the three miles to the farm and stashed his contracts in the loft with the money there. When he was climbing down, he saw his dad standing next to the stalls.

"Hev. Am I in time for dinner?" John asked.

His father didn't reply, and then he realized that he was in trouble.

His father's face was red, his cheeks puffed out. He stood in overalls, his fists at his hips.

"In the house." The words were soft, punctuated.

"In the house, now." His father lifted an arm, pointing.

John went, and as he entered the house, he was angry too. How dare he order him around?

His mother was waiting at the kitchen table, her fingers folded in a clenched, white mound.

"Where were you?" his father demanded.

"None of your business," John said. "While you're in my house, you'll answer my questions!" his father roared.

"I'll get my things and go," John said.

"Bill..." his mother said. "We've discussed this."

His father looked away, then said, "He pranced into the barn like he'd done nothing wrong."

His mother turned to him. "Where were you, John?"

He opened his mouth to rail, but instead he said, "Toledo, I had to . . . cool off."

His mother nodded. "That's important."

"Yeah."

"Are you feeling better now?"

"Yes . . . no." Suddenly he was sick to his stomach. Suddenly he was more angry with himself than with his father.

"It's okay," she said. "It's okay what you did, and we're glad you're back. Bill?"

His father grunted, then said, "Son, we're glad you're back." And then he took John in his big farmer arms and squeezed him.

John sobbed before he could fight it down, and then he was bawling like he hadn't since he was ten.

"I'm sorry, Dad." The words were muffled in his shoulder. His throat was tight.

"It's okay. It's okay."

His mother joined them and they held onto him for a long time. John found he didn't want to let go. He hadn't hugged his parents in a long time.

John climbed the steps to the library. This universe looked just like his own. He didn't really care how it was different. All he wanted was to figure out how to get home. He'd tried the device a dozen times in the square, but the device would not allow him to go backwards, not even to universes before his own.

He needed help; he needed professional help. He needed to understand

about parallel universes.

Browsing the card catalog, it soon became apparent the Findlay library was not the place to do a scientific search on hypothetical physics. All he could find were a dozen science fiction novels which were no help at all.

He was going to have to go to Toledo. U of T was his second choice after Case. It was a state school and close. Half his friends would be going

there. It had a decent if not stellar physics department.

He took the bus to Toledo, dozing along the way. A local brought him to

The Physics Library was a single room with three tables. Stacks lined all the walls and extended into the middle of the room, making it seem cramped and tiny. It smelled of dust, just like the Findlay Public Library.

"Student ID?"

John turned to the bespectacled student sitting at the front desk. For a moment, he froze, then patted his front pockets. "I left it at the dorm."

The student looked peeved then said, "Well, bring it next time, frosh."

He waved him in.

"I will."

John brought the catalog up on a terminal and searched for "Parallel Universe." There wasn't much. In fact there was nothing at all in the Physics Library. He was searching for the wrong subject. Physicists didn't call them parallel universes, of course, TV and movies called them parallel universes.

He couldn't think what else to search for. Perhaps there was a more formal term for what he was looking for, but he had no idea what it was.

He'd have to ask his dumb questions directly of a professor.

He left the library and walked down the second floor hall, looking at name plates above doors. Billboards lined the walls, stapled and tacked with colloquia notices, assistantship postings, apartments to share. A lot of the offices were empty. At the end of the hall was the small office of Dr. Frank Wilson, Associate Professor of Physics, lit and occupied.

John knew associate professors were low on the totem pole, which was probably why he was the only one in his office. And maybe a younger pro-

fessor would be more willing to listen to what he had to say.

He knocked on the door.

"Come on in."

Paul Melko

He entered the office, found it cluttered on all sides with bookshelves stacked to bursting with papers and tomes, but neat at the center, where

a man sat at an empty desk reading a journal.

"You're the first person to show for office hours today," he said. Professor Wilson was in his late twenties, with black glasses, sandy beard, and hair that seemed in need of a cut. He wore a grey jacket over a blue oxford.

"Yeah," John said. "I have some questions, and I don't know how to ask them."

"On the homework set?"

"No. On another topic." John was suddenly uncertain. "Parallel universes."

Professor Wilson nodded. "Hmmm." He took a drink of his coffee, then said. "Are you one of my students? Freshman Physics?"

"No," John said.

"Then what's your interest in this? Are you from the creative writing department?"

"No, I . . . "

"Your question, while it seems simple to you, is extremely complex. Have you taken calculus?"

"Just half a semester..."

"Then you'll never understand the math behind it. The authorities here are Hawking, Wheeler, Everett." He ticked them off on his fingers. "You're talking about quantum cosmology, Graduate level stuff."

John said quickly before he could cut him off again, "But my question

is more practical. Not theoretical."

"Practical parallel worlds? Nonsense. Quantum cosmology states that there may be multiple universes out there, but the most likely one is ours, via the weak anthropic principle. Which means since we're here, we can take it as a given that we exist. Well. it's more complex than that."

"But what about other universes, other people just like us?"

The man laughed. "Highly unlikely. Occam's razor divests us of that idea."

"How would I travel between universes?" John said, grasping at straws against the man's brisk manner.

"You can't, you won't, not even remotely possible."

"But what if I said it was. What if I knew for sure it was possible."

"I'd say your observations were manipulated or you saw something that you interpreted incorrectly."

John touched the wound in his calf where the cat-dog had bitten him. No, he'd seen what he'd seen. He'd felt what he'd felt. There was no doubt about that.

"I know what I saw."

Wilson waved his hands. "I won't debate your observations. It's a waste

of my time. Tell me what you think you saw."

John paused, not sure where to start and what to tell, and Professor Wilson jumped in. "See? You aren't sure what you saw, are you?" He leaned forward. "A physicist must have a discerning eye. It must be nurtured, tested, used to separate the chaff from the wheat." He leaned back

again, glanced out his window onto the quad below. "My guess is that you've seen too many Schwarzenegger movies or read too many books. You may have seen something peculiar, but before you start applying complex physical theories to explain it, you should eliminate the obvious. Now, I have another student of mine waiting, one I know is in my class, so I think you should run along and think about what you really saw."

John turned and saw a female student standing behind him, waiting. His rage surged inside him. The man was patronizing him, making assumptions based on his questions and demeanty Wilson was dismissing

him.

"I can prove it," he said, his jaw clenched.

The professor just looked at him, then beckoned the student into his office.

John turned and stalked down the hall. He was asking for help, and he'd been laughed at.

"I'll show him," John said. He took the steps two at a time and flung

open the door to the quadrangle that McCormick faced

"Watch it, dude," a student said, almost hit by the swinging door. John brushed past him

He grabbed a handful of stones and, standing at the edge of the quadrangle, began flinging them at the window that he thought was Wilson's. He threw a dozen and started to draw a crowd of students, until Wilson looked out the window, opened it and shouted, "Campus security will be along in a moment."

John yelled back, "Watch this, you stupid bastard!" He toggled the device forward one universe and pulled the lever.

John awoke in the night, gripped by the same nightmare, trapped in darkness, no air, his body held rigid. He sat up and flung the covers away from him, unable to have anything touching him. He ripped off his pajamas as well and stood naked in the bedroom, just breathing. It was too hot; he opened the window and stood before it.

His breathing slowed, as the heavy air of the October night brought the smells of the farm to him: manure and dirt. He leaned against the edge

of the window, and his flesh rose in goose pimples.

It was a dream he'd had before, and he knew where it came from. He'd transferred near Lake Erie, on a small, deserted beach not far from Port Clinton, and ended up buried in a sand dune. He'd choked on the sand and would have died there if a fisherman hadn't seen his arm flailing. He could have died. It was pure luck that the guy had been there to dig his head out. He'd never transferred near a body of water or a river again.

That hadn't been the only time either. In Columbus, Ohio, he'd transferred into a concrete step, his chest and lower body stuck. He'd been unable to reach the toggle button on the device and had to wait until someone wandered by and called the fire department. They'd used a jackhammer to free him. When they'd turned to him, demanding how he'd been trapped, he'd feigned unconsciousness and transferred out from the ambulance.

After that, each time he touched the trigger he did so with the fear that he'd end up in something solid, unable to transfer out again, unable to breath, unable to move. He was nauseated, his stomach kicking, his armpits soaked, before the jumps.

It was the cruelest of jokes. He had the most powerful device in the

world and it was broken.

"No more," he said to himself. "No more of that." He had a family now, in

ways he hadn't expected.

The confrontation with his parents had been angry, then sad, and ended with all of them crying and hugging. He'd meant to be tough; he'd meant to tell his parents that he was an adult now, and could take care of himself, but his resolve had melted in the face of their genuine care for him. He'd cried, goddamn it all.

He'd promised to reconsider the letter. He'd promised to talk with Gushman again. He'd promised to be more considerate to his parents.

Was he turning into Johnny Farmboy?

He'd gone to bed empty, spent, his mind placid. But his subconscious had pulled the dream out. Smothering, suffocating, his body held inflexible as his lungs screamed. He shivered, then shut the window. His body had excelled all its heat.

He slipped back into bed and closed his eyes.

"I'm becoming Johnny Farmboy," he whispered. "Screw it all."

McCormick Hall looked identical. In fact the same student guarded the door of the Physics Library, asked him the same question.

"Student ID?"

"I left it in my dorm room," John replied without hesitation.

"Well, bring it next time, frosh."

John smiled at him. "Don't call me frosh again, geek."

The student blinked at him, dismayed.

His visit with Professor Wilson had not been a total loss. Wilson had mentioned the subject that he should have searched for instead of parallel universes. He had said that the field of study was called quantum cosmology.

Cosmology, John knew, was the study of the origin of the universe. Quantum theory, however, was applied to individual particles, such as atoms and electrons. It was a statistical way to model those particles. Quantum cosmology, John figured, was a statistical way to model the universe. Not just one universe, either, John hoped, but all universes.

He sat down at a terminal. This time there were thirty hits. He printed

the list and began combing the stacks.

Half of the books were summaries of colloquia or workshops. The papers were riddled with equations, and all of them assumed an advanced understanding of the subject matter. John had no basis to understand any of the math.

In the front matter of one of the books was a quote from a physicist regarding a theory called the Many-Worlds Theory. "When a quantum transition occurs, an irreversible one, which is happening in our universe at nearly an infinite rate, a new universe branches off from that transition in which the transition did not occur. Our universe is just a single one of a

myriad copies, each slightly different than the others."

John felt an affinity for the quote immediately. He had seen other universes in which small changes had resulted in totally different futures, such as Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the electric motor. It almost made sense then, that every universe he visited was one of billions in which some quantum event or decision occurred differently.

He shut the book. He thought he had enough to ask his questions of

Wilson now.

The second floor hallway seemed identical, right down to the empty offices and cluttered billboards. Professor Wilson's office was again at the end of the hall, and he was there, reading a journal. John wondered if it was the same one.

"Come on in," he said at John's knock.

"I have a couple questions."

"About the homework set?"

"No, this is unrelated. It's about quantum cosmology."

Wilson put his paper down and nodded. "A complex subject. What's your question?"

"Do you agree with the Many-Worlds Theory?" John asked.

"No."

John waited, unsure what to make of the single syllable answer. Then he said, "Uh, no?"

"No. It's hogwash in my opinion. What's your interest in it? Are you one of my students?" Wilson sported the same gray jacket over the same blue oxford.

"You don't believe in multiple universes as an explanation . . . for . . ." John was at a loss again. He didn't know as much as he thought he knew. He still couldn't ask the right questions.

"For quantum theory?" asked Wilson. "No. It's not necessary. Do you

know Occam's Theory?"

John nodded.

"Which is simpler? One universe that moves under statistical laws at the quantum level or an infinite number of universes each stemming from every random event? How many universes have you seen?"

John began to answer the rhetorical question.

"One," said Wilson before John could open his mouth. Wilson looked John up and down. "Are you a student here?"

"Uh, no. I'm in high school," John admitted.

"I see. This is really pretty advanced stuff, young man. Graduate level stuff. Have you had calculus?"

"Just half a semester."

"Let me try to explain it another way." He picked up a paperweight off his desk, a rock with eyes and mouth painted on it. "I am going to make a decision to drop this rock between now and ten seconds from now." He paused, then dropped the rock after perhaps seven seconds. "A random process. In ten other universes, assuming for simplicity that I could only drop the rock at integer seconds and not fractional seconds, I dropped the rock at each of the seconds from one to ten. I made ten universes by gen-

erating a random event. By the Many-Worlds Theory, they all exist. The question is, where did all the matter and energy come from to build ten new universes just like that?" He snapped his fingers. "Now extrapolate to the nearly infinite number of quantum transitions happening on the earth this second. How much energy is required to build all those universe? Where does it come from? Clearly the Many-Worlds Theory is absurd."

John shook his head, trying to get his arms around the idea. He couldn't refute Wilson's argument. He realized how little he really knew. He said, "But what if multiple worlds did exist? Could you travel between the

worlds?"

"You can't, you won't, not even remotely possible."

But---'

"It can't happen, even if the theory were true."

"Then the theory is wrong," John said to himself.

"I told you it was wrong. There are no parallel universes."

John felt the frustration growing in him "But I know there are I've

seen them."

"Td say your observations were manipulated or you saw something that

"I'd say your observations were manipulated or you saw something tha you interpreted incorrectly."

"Don't condescend to me again!" John shouted.

Wilson looked at him calmly, then stood.

"Get out of this office, and I suggest you get off this campus right now. I recommend that you seek medical attention immediately," Wilson said coldly.

John's frustration turned to rage. Wilson was no different here than in the last universe. He assumed John was wrong because he acted like a hick, a farm boy. He was certain John knew nothing that he didn't already know.

John flung himself at the man. Wilson's papers scattered across his chest and onto the floor. John grabbed at his jacket from across the desk and yelled into his face, "I'll prove it to you, goddammit! I'll prove it."

"Get off me," Wilson yelled and pushed John away. Wilson lost his balance when John's grip on his jacket slipped and he fell on the floor

against his chair. "You maniac!"

John stood across from the desk from him, his breathing coming hard. He needed proof. His eyes saw the diploma on the wall of Wilson's office. He grabbed it and ran out of the office. If he couldn't convince this Wilson, he'd convince the next. He found an alcove beside the building and transferred out.

John stood clutching Wilson's diploma to his chest, his heart still thumping from the confrontation. Suddenly he felt silly. He'd attacked the man and stolen his diploma to prove to another version of him that he wasn't a wacko.

He looked across the quad. He watched a boy catch a Frisbee, and then saw juxtaposed the images of him tripping and not catching it, just missing it to the left, to the right, a million permutations. Everything in the quad was suddenly a blur.

He shook his head, then lifted the diploma so that he could read it. He'd

try again, and this time he'd try the direct approach.

John climbed the steps to Wilson's office and knocked.

"Come on in."

"I have a problem."

Wilson nodded and asked, "How can I help?"

"I've visited you three times. Twice before you wouldn't believe me,"

"I don't think I've ever seen you before," he said. "You're not one of my students, are you?"

"No, I'm not. We've never met, but I've met versions of you."

"Really."

John yelled, "Don't patronize me! You do that every fucking time, and I've had enough." His arms were shaking. "I don't belong in this universe. I belong in another. Do you understand?"

Wilson's face was emotionless, still. "No, please explain."

"I was tricked into using a device. I was tricked by another version of myself because he wanted my life. He told me I could get back, but the device either doesn't work right or only goes in one direction. I want to get back to my universe, and I need help."

Wilson nodded. "Why don't you sit down?"

John nodded, tears welling in his eyes. He'd finally gotten through to Wilson.

"So you've tried talking with me-other versions of me-in other uni-

verses, and I won't help. Why not?"

"We start by discussing parallel universes or quantum cosmology or Mulit-Worlds Theory, and you end up shooting it all down with Occam's Razor." "Sounds like something I'd say." Wilson said, nodding, "So you have a

device."

"Yeah. It's here." John pointed to his chest, then unbuttoned his shirt.

Wilson looked at the device gravely. "What's that in your hand?"

John glanced down at the diploma. "It's  $\dots$  your diploma from the last universe. I sorta took it for proof."

Wilson held out his hand, and John handed it over. There was an identical one on the wall. The professor glanced from one to the other. "Uh huh," he said, then after a moment, "I see."

He put the diploma down and said, "My middle name is Lawrence."

John saw that the script of the diploma he'd stolen said "Frank B. Wilson" while the one on the wall said "Frank L. Wilson."

"I guess it's just a difference-"

"Who put you up to this? Was it Greene? This is just the sort of thing he'd put together."

Anguish washed over John. "No! This is all real."

"That device strapped to your chest. Now that's classic. And the diploma. Nice touch."

"Really. This is no hoax."

"Enough already. I'm on to you. Is Greene in the hall?" Wilson called through the door. "You can come out now, Charles. I'm on to you."

"There is no Charles. There is no Greene," John said quietly.

"And you must be from the drama department, because you are good. Two more copies of me! As if the universe can handle one."

John stood up and walked out of the office, his body suddenly too heavy. "Don't forget the shingle," Wilson called, holding up the diploma. John

shrugged and continued walking down the hall.

He sat on a bench next to the quad for a long time. The sun set and the warm summer day vanished along with the kids playing Frisbee with their shirts tied around their waists.

Finally he stood and walked toward the Student Union. He needed food. He'd skipped lunch at some point; his stomach was growling at him. He didn't feel hungry but his body was demanding food. He just felt tired.

There was a pizza franchise in the Student Union called Papa Bob's. He ordered a small pizza and a Coke, ate it mechanically. It tasted like card-

board, chewy cardboard.

The Union was desolate as well, all the students driving home or heading to the dorms for studying and TV. John spotted a pay phone as he sat pondering what he would do next, whether he should confront Wilson again. John realized that he should have taken a picture of the man or demanded he write himself a note. But he would have told John that it was computer generated or forged.

He walked over to the phone and dialed his number. The phone demanded seventy-five cents. He inserted the coins and the phone began to

ring.

"Hello?" his mother answered.

"Hello," he replied.

"Johnny?" she asked, surprised.
"No. could I talk to John please?"

She laughed. "You sound just like him. Gave me a fright, hearing that, but he's standing right here. Here he is."

"Hello?" It was his voice.

"Hi, this is Karl Smith from your English class," John said making up a name and a class.

"Yeah?"

"I missed class today, and I was wondering if we had an assignment."

"Yeah, we did. We had an essay on the poem we read, Tennyson's 'Maud.' Identify the poetic components, like the last one."

"Oh, yeah," John said. The poem was in the same unit as the Hopkins

one. He remembered seeing it. "Thanks." He hung up the phone.

This universe seemed just like his own. He could fit right in here. The thought startled him, and then he asked himself what was stopping him. He walked to the bus station and bought a ticket back to Findlay.

John helped his father around the farm the next day. He took it as penance for upsetting his parents. They still thought he was Johnny Farmboy, and so he had to act the part, at least until his projects started churning.

As they replaced some of the older wood in the fence, John said, "Dad,

I'm going to need to borrow the truck on Saturday night."

His father paused, a big smile on his face. "Got a big date, do you?" He said it in such a way that John realized he didn't think his son really had a date.

"Yes. I'm taking Casey Nicholson out."

"Casey?" His father held the plank as John hammered a nail into it. "Nice girl."

"Yeah, I'm taking her to a movie at the Bijou."

"The Bijou?"

"I mean the Strand," John said, silently yelling at himself for sharing details that could catch him up. The movie theatre was always called the Palace. Bilou. or Strand.

"Uh-huh."

John took the shovel and began shoring up the next post.

"What movie you gonna see?"

Before he could stop himself, he answered, "Does it matter?"

His father paused, then laughed heartily. "Not if you're in the balcony, it doesn't." John was surprised, then he laughed too.

"Don't tell your mother I told you, but we used to go to the Strand all the time. I don't think we watched a single movie."

"Dad!" John said. "You guys were . . . make-out artists?"

"Only place we could go to do it," he said with a grin. "Couldn't use this place; your grampa would have beat the tar out of me. Couldn't use her place; your other grampa would have shot me." He eyed John and nodded.

"You're lucky we live in more liberal times."

John laughed, recalling the universe where the free love expressions of the 60s had never ended, where AIDS had killed a quarter of the population and syphilis and gonorrhea had been contracted by 90 percent of the population by 1980. There, dating involved elaborate chaperone systems and blood tests.

"I know I'm lucky."

In the early hours of the morning, John slipped across Gurney, through the Walders' field and found a place to watch the farm from the copse of maple trees. He knelt on the soft ground, wondering if this was where John Prime had waited for him.

John's arms tingled as he anticipated his course of action. He was owed a life, he figured. His had been stolen and he was owed another. He'd wanted his own back, and he'd tried to get it. He'd researched and questioned and figured, but he couldn't see any way back.

So he was ready to settle for second best.

He'd trick the John Rayburn here, just like he'd been tricked. Tease him with the possibilities. Tickle his curiosity. And if he wasn't interested, he'd force him. Knock him out and strap the device on his chest and send him on.

Let him figure it out like John had. Let him find another universe to be a part of. John deserved his life back. He'd played by the rules all his life. He'd been a good kid; he'd loved his parents. He'd gone to church every Sundav.

He'd been pushed around for too long. John Prime had pushed him around, Professor Wilson, the cat-dogs. He'd been running and running and with no purpose. And enough of that. It was time to take back what had been stolen from him.

Dawn cast a slow red upon the woods. His mother opened the back door and stepped out into the yard with a basket. He watched her open the hen house and collect eggs. She was far away, but he recognized her as his mother instantly. Logically, he knew she wasn't his mother, but to his eyes, she was. That was all that mattered.

His father pecked her lightly on the cheek as he headed for the barn. He wore heavy boots, thick ones, coveralls, and a John Deere cap. He entered the barn, started the tractor, and drove toward the fields. He'd be back for breakfast in an hour, John knew. Bacon, eggs, toast, and, of

course, coffee.

They were his parents. It was his farm. Everything was as he remem-

bered it. And that was enough for him.

The light in John's room turned on John Rayburn was awake. He'd be coming out soon to do his chores. John waited until this John went into the barn, then he dashed across the empty pumpkin field for the barn's rear door. The rear door was locked, but if you jiggled it, John knew, it came loose.

John grabbed the handle, listening for sounds from within the barn, then shook it once for a few seconds. The door held. He paused, then shook it again and it came open suddenly, loudly. He slipped into the barn and hid between two rows of stacked bales.

"Hey, Stan-Man. How are you this morning?"

The voice came from near the stalls. This John—he started thinking of him as John Subprime—was feeding his horse.

"Here's an apple. How about some oats?"

John crept along the row of bales, then stopped when he could see the side of John Subprime's face from across the barn. John was safe in the shadows, but he needed to get closer to him.

Stan nickered and nuzzled John Subprime's head, drawing his tongue

across his forehead.

"Stop that," he said, with a smile.

John Subprime turned his attention to the sheep, and when he did so,

John slipped around the bales and behind the corn picker.

He realized something as he sat in the woods, and his plan had changed accordingly. John wasn't a liar. He wasn't a smooth talker. He couldn't do what John Prime had done to him, that is, talk him into using the device. John would have to do it some other way. And the only way he could think to do it was the hard way.

John lifted a shovel off a pole next to the corn picker. It was a short shovel with a flat blade. He figured one blow to the head and John Subprime would be out cold. Then he'd strap the device to his chest, toggle the universe counter up one, and then hit the lever with the end of the shovel. It'd take half the shovel with him, but that was okay. Then John would finish feeding the animals and go in for breakfast. No one would ever know.

John ignored the queasy feeling in his stomach. Gripping the shovel in two hands, he advanced on John Subprime.

John's faint shadow must have alerted him.

"Dad?" John Subprime said, then turned. "My God!" He shrank away

from the raised shovel, his eyes passing from it to John's face. His expression changed from shock to fear.

John's body strained, the shovel raised above his head.

John Subprime leaned against the sheep pen, one arm raised, the other . . .

He had only one arm.

Nausea washed through John's body and he dropped the shovel. It clattered on the wood floor of the barn, settled at John Subprime's feet.

"What am I doing?" he cried. His stomach heaved, but nothing came up but a yellow bile that he spat on the floor. He heaved again at the smell of

He was no better than John Prime. He didn't deserve a life.

John staggered to the back door of the barn.

"Wait!"

He ran across the field. Something grabbed at his feet and he fell. He pulled his foot free and ran into the woods.

"Wait! Don't run!"

John turned to see John Subprime running after him, just one arm, the right, pumping. He slowed twenty feet in front of John, then stopped, his hand extended

"You're me," he said. "Only you have both arms."

John nodded, his breath too ragged, his stomach too tense to speak. Tears were welling in his eyes as he looked at the man he had contemplated clubbing.

"How can that be?"

John found his voice. "I'm a version of you."

John Subprime nodded vigorously. "Only you never lost your arm!" "No, I never lost it." John nodded his head. "How did it happen?"

John Subprime grimaced. "Pitchfork, I was helping dad in the barn loft.

I lost my balance, fell. The pitchfork caught my bicep, sliced it. . . .

"I remember." In John's universe, he'd been twelve, and he had fallen from the loft while he and his father loaded it with hay. He had thought he could carry the bale, but he hadn't been strong enough and he'd fallen to the farm yard, knocking the wind out of himself, bumping the pitchfork over as he fell. The pitchfork had landed next to him, nicking his shoulder. His father had looked on in horror and then anger. The scolding from his mother had been worse than the nick. "I just got a cut on my shoulder."

John Subprime laughed. "In one world, I lose my arm, and in another I get a scratch. Don't that beat all." Why was he laughing? Didn't he realize

that John had meant to steal his life? "Yeah."

"Why don't you come inside and have some breakfast?"

John looked at him, unsure of how he could ask that. He velled, "I was going to steal your life!"

John Subprime nodded. "Is that why you had the shovel? Then you saw my arm. No way you could steal my life. You've got two arms." He laughed.

"It wasn't just that," John said. "I couldn't bring myself to hurt . . .

"Yeah, I know."

"How could you possibly?" John velled, "I've lost everything!" He

reached into his shirt and toggled the universe counter. "I'm sorry, but I have to leave."

"No. Wait!" John Subprime yelled.

John backed away and pulled the lever.

The world blurred and John Subprime blinked away.

There was the barn and the farmhouse, and off in the distance his father on the tractor. Another universe where he didn't belong. He toggled the device and pulled the lever. Again the farmhouse. He didn't belong here either. Again he moved forward through the universes. The farmhouse was gone. And again. Then it was there, but green instead of red. He toggled it again and again, wanting to get as far away from his contemplated crime as possible.

The clouds flew around in chaotic fast motion. The trees he stood in were sometimes there, sometimes not. The farmhouse bounced left and right a foot, a half foot. The barn more, sometimes behind the house, sometimes to the east of it. The land was the one constant, a gently sloping field. Once he found himself facing the aluminum siding of a house.

And then it was gone as he transferred out.

A hundred times, he must have transferred through universe after universe where he didn't belong until finally he stopped and collapsed to the ground, sobbing.

He'd lost his life. He'd lost it all, and he'd never get it back.

He rested his head against the trunk of a maple and closed his eyes. After the tears were gone, after his breathing had slowed, he slept, exhausted.

"Hey there, fella. Time to get up."

Someone poked him. John looked up into his father's face.

"Dad?"

"Not unless my wife's been hiding something from me." He offered a hand, and John pulled himself up. John was in the copse of maples, his father from this universe standing beside him, holding a walking stick. He didn't recognize John.

"Sorry for sleeping here in your woods. Got tired."

"Yeah. It'll happen." He pointed toward Gurney with his stick. "Better be heading along. The town's that way." He pointed north. "About two miles."

"Yes, sir." John began walking. Then he stopped. His father hadn't recognized him. Which meant what? John wasn't sure. He turned back to him. "Sir, I could use some lunch. If you have extra. I could work it off."

Bill Rayburn—John forced himself to use the name in his head. This man was not his father—checked his watch, then nodded. "Lunch in a few minutes, my watch and my stomach tell me. Cold cuts. As to working it off, no need."

"That's fine."

"What's your name?"

"John . . . John Wilson." He took Professor Wilson's last name spontaneously.

John turned and followed Bill across the pumpkin field toward the house. The pumpkins were still on the vine, unpicked and just a week un-

til Halloween. Some of them were already going bad. He passed a large one with its top caved in, a swarm of gnats boiling out of it

He remembered the joke his father had told him a week ago.

"How do you fix a broken jack-o'-lantern?" he asked.

Bill turned and glanced at him as if he were a darn fool

"With a numpkin patch," John replied, his face straight.

Bill stopped, looked at him for a moment, then a small smile crept

across his lins "I'll have to remember that one"

The barn was behind the house, smaller than he remembered and in need of paint. There was a hole in the roof that should have been patched. In fact the farm seemed just a bit more decrepit than he remembered. Had hard times fallen on his parents here?

"Janet, another one for lunch." Bill called as he opened the back door.

"Leave your shoes."

John took his shoes off, left them where he always did. He hung his bag on a hook. It was a different hook, brass and molded, where he remembered a row of dowels that he and his father had glued into the sideboard.

John could tell Janet wasn't keen on a stranger for lunch but she didn't say anything, and she wouldn't until she and Bill were alone. John smiled

at her, thanked her for letting him have lunch.

She wore the same apron he remembered. No, he realized. She'd worn this one, with a red check pattern and deep pockets in front, when he was vounger.

She served John a turkey sandwich, with a slice of cheese on it. He thanked her again as she did, and ate the sandwich slowly. Janet had not recognized him either.

Bill said to Janet, "Got some good apples for cider, I think, a few bushels."

John raised his evebrows at that. He and his father could get a couple bushels per tree. Maybe the orchard was smaller here. Or maybe it had been hit with blight. He glanced at Bill and saw the shake in his hand. He'd never realized how old his father was, or maybe he had aged more quickly in this universe for reasons unknown. Maybe a few bushels was all he could gather.

"I should work on the drainage in the far field tomorrow, I've got a lake there now and it's going to rot my seed next season." The far field had always been a problem, the middle lower than the edges, a pond in the

making.

"You need to pick those pumpkins too, before they go bad," John said suddenly.

Bill looked at him.

"What do you know of farming?"

John swallowed his bite of sandwich, angry at himself for drawing the man's resentment. John knew better than to pretend farm another farmer's fields.

"Uh, I grew up on a farm like this. We grew pumpkins, sold them before Halloween and got a good price for them. You'll have to throw half your crop away if you wait until Sunday, and then who'll buy that late?"

Janet said to Bill, "You've been meaning to pick those pumpkins."

"Practically too late now," Bill said. "The young man's right. Half the

crop's bad."

"I could help you pick them this afternoon." John said it because he wanted to spend more time there. It was the first chance he'd had in a long time to relax. They weren't his parents; he knew that. But they were good people.

Bill eyed him again appraisingly.

"You worked a farm like this, you say. What else you know how to do?"

"I can pick apples. I can lay wood shingles for that hole in your barn."
"You have marging to do that too Bill." I can't said Shares was repring to

"You been meaning to do that too, Bill," Janet said. She was warming to him.

"It's hard getting that high up, and I have a few other priorities," he said. He looked back at John. "We'll try you out for the day, for lunch and dinner and three dollars an hour. If it isn't working out, you hit the road at sundown, no complaining."

John said, "Deal."

"Janet, call McHenry and ask him if he needs another load of pumpkins and if he wants me to drop 'em off tonight."

John waited, outside the County Clerk's window, his rage mounting. How damn long did it take to hand over a marriage certificate? Casey was waiting for him outside the judge's chamber, nine months pregnant. If the man behind the glass wall took any longer, the kid was going to be born a bastard. And Casey's and his parents had been adamant about that. No bastard. He'd said he'd take care of the kid and he meant it, but they wanted it official.

Finally the clerk handed over the license and the two notarized blood

tests and John snatched them from his hand.

"Thanks," he said, turning and heading for the court building.

After the wedding he and Casey were driving up to Toledo to honeymoon on the last of his cash. In a week he was scheduled to start his GE job. He was going to work one of the assembly lines, but that was just un-

til the book he was writing—The Shining—took off.

The trip to Toledo served the purpose of the honeymoon, as well as the fact that he had meetings regarding the screwed-up Rubik's Cube. It still irked him. The patent search had turned up nothing and they had built a design, one that finally worked, and they'd sunk \$95,000 into a production run. Then they'd gotten a call from the lawyer in Belgium. Apparently there was a patent filed in Hungary by that bastard Rubik. The company Rubik had hired in New York to market the things had gone under and he'd never bothered to try again. Someone had gotten wind of their product and now they wanted a piece of the deal.

The lawyer had wanted to drop him like a hot potato, but he'd convinced him that there was still cash to be made from it. Some cash at least. He'd have to pay a licensing fee probably. Kiss some ass. But there was money to be made. He'd stick it out with John, though the retainer

was just about gone.

Casey waved as he rounded the corner on the third floor in front of the

judge's office. Casey sat on a bench, her belly seeming to rest on her knees. Her face was puffy and pink, as if someone had pumped her with

"Hi, Johnny," she said, "Did you get the paper?"

He hated being called Johnny and he'd told her that, but she still did it. Everybody used to call Johnny Farmboy Johnny so he was stuck with it.

Some things just couldn't be changed.

He put on a smile and waved the certificate. "Yeah," he said. "Everything's ready." He kissed Casey on the cheek. "Darling, you look radiant." He'd be glad once the baby was out of her body; then she could start dressing the way he liked again. He hoped her cheerleading uniform still fit.

The ceremony was quick, though Casey had to dab her eyes. John wasn't surprised that none of Casey's friends were there. Getting pregnant had put a lot of stress on her relationships. Field hockey had been right out.

The judge signed the certificate and it was done, John was glad Casey's and his parents hadn't come. They'd wanted to, but John had axed that request. They had settled for a reception after the baby was horn.

He knew his parents were disappointed in what had happened, and John hadn't wanted to face them during the ceremony. They'd wanted him to go to college, to better himself. But those were the dreams they had for Johnny Farmboy. He was a completely different thing.

They'd understand once the money started rolling in. They'd not be dis-

appointed in their son any more.

John slowly lowered Casey into the bucket seat of the Trans Am, a splurge with the last of his cash. He had to have decent wheels. The Trans Am pulled away and he headed for Route 16. "Glad that's over with," he said.

"Really?" Casey asked.

"Well, I'm glad it's over with and we're married now," he said quick-

ly.
"Yeah, I know what you mean." John nodded. He had to be careful what he said with Casey, what he shared. About the time she'd started showing and they'd had to tell their parents. John had wished he had the device, wished he could jump to the next universe and start over. John realized he should have killed Johnny Farmboy, hidden the body, and kept the device. Now the Cube had to work right. With his money almost gone, he might not have another chance, no matter how good an idea the AbCruncher was. He'd wanted to come clean and tell Casev all about his past, but he didn't dare. How could she believe him?

He was stuck here and he had to make it work. There were no other choices now. This was the life he'd chosen. He patted Casey's leg and smiled at her. He'd make some money, enough to set her and the kid up, and then he'd have his freedom to do what he wanted with his life. It would take a little longer now; there were some bumps in the road, but

he'd succeed. He was Johnny Prime.

222 Paul Melko Spring had arrived, but without the sun on his shoulders, John was chilly. He'd started working on the car in the morning and the sun had been on him, and now, after lunch, it was downright cold. He considered getting the tractor out and hauling the beat-up Trans Am into the sun. He finally decided it was too much trouble. It was late and there was no way he'd get the carburetor back together before dinner.

He'd bought the car for fifty dollars, but the car had yet to start. He'd need it soon. He started a second shift job at the GE plant in May. And

then in the fall he was taking classes at the University of Toledo.

He'd applied to the University of Toledo's continuing education program. He couldn't enroll as a traditional freshman, which was all right with him, because of the fact that he'd taken the GED instead of graduating from high school. He wouldn't get into the stuff he wanted to learn until his senior year: quantum field theory, cosmology, general relativity. That was all right. He was okay where he was for the time being. If he didn't think about home, he could keep going.

With the plant job, washing machine assembly line work from four until midnight, he'd have enough for tuition for the year. Plus Bill and Janet were still paying him three an hour for chores he was helping out with. He noted ironically to himself that in his own universe he wouldn't have been paid a dime. In September he'd get another job for pocket money

and rent near the university.

He set the carburetor on the front seat and rolled the car back into the barn. This was a good universe, John had decided, but he wasn't staying. No, he was happy with Bill and Janet taking him in. They were kind and generous, just like his own parents in nearly every respect, but he couldn't stay here. Not for the long term.

The universe was a mansion with a million rooms. People didn't know they were in just one room. They didn't know there was a way through

the walls to other rooms.

But John did. He knew there were walls. And he knew something else

too. He knew walls came down. There were holes between worlds.

John had listed his major as physics, and he'd laughed when the manila envelope from the department had arrived, welcoming him and listing his faculty advisor as Dr. Frank Wilson. Professor Wilson's world was go-

ing to shatter one day, and John was going to do it for him.

John knew something that no other physicist in this world knew. A human could pass through the walls of the universe. Just knowing that it was possible, just knowing, without a bit of doubt—he needed only to pull up his pant leg and look at the scars from the cat-dog bite—that there were a million universes out there, was all it would take for John to figure the science of it out.

That was his goal. He had the device and he had his knowledge. He'd reverse engineer it, take it apart, ask the questions of the masters in the field, he would himself become one of those masters, to find out how it

was done.

And then, once the secrets of the universe lay open to him, he would go back and he would kick the shit out of John Prime.

He smiled as he shut the barn door.

## **AUSSIES, BRITS, AND YANKS**

PARADOX by John Meaney Pyr, \$25.00 ISBN: 1591023084

CONTEXT by John Meaney Pyr, \$25.00 ISBN: 1591023351

THE AFFINITY TRAP by Martin Sketchley Pyr, \$15.00 ISBN: 1591023394

THE HEALER by Michael Blumlein, MD Pyr, \$25.00 ISBN: 1591023149

THE RESURRECTED MAN by Sean Williams Pyr, \$25.00 ISBN: 1591023114

t seems to me that a disproportionate amount of not only the best Anglophone science fiction but of out-and-out science fiction in general is being written by British and Australian writers, and in retrospect it seems that this has been going on for quite some time.

Of course the Brits and Aussies are not actually publishing more science fiction titles per annum than the Americans, but given the relative demographics, the number of such titles published by non-Americans greatly exceeds what the population statistics might lead one to expect. Nor am I talking about "SF"

in general, only about actual science fiction itself.

Not that British science fiction writers are celebrating the state of science fiction publishing. There are all too many worthy British science fiction novels that haven't been finding publishers in the United States. Indeed, there are newer science fiction writers of repute in Britain who have never published a book in the United States, and quite a few who were once established in the US who now have a very difficult time securing American publication. Original Australian science fiction publishing, squeezed between British and American imports, has always been small time stuff in commercial terms

So Australian and British science fiction writers are having an even more difficult time of it economically than their American counterparts, certainly when it comes to publishing their work in the United States, and even in their home markets. And yet there seem to be more of them, and more interesting newer British and Australian writers, publishing actual science fiction rather than "sci-fi" or fantasy or "SF" in their home markets percentagewise than Americans are doing, and of an overall higher literary quality too.

I'm not talking about the New Wave or its literary successors, but rather what might be called the high quality more or less down the middle science fiction exemplified in the past by much of John Brunner, no little of earlier Brian Aldiss, more of Arthur C. Clarke than Sir Arthur might care to admit, George Turner, and so forth. In the present by the likes of Damien Broderick, Greg Egan, Ian Stewart, Stephen Baxter, Brian Stableford, Paul McAuley, and so forth, but also by quite a few writers you probably haven't even heard of. Nor had I, until I recently became acquainted with some of their work.

Now I'm not saying that this latter group of writers is less literarily ambitious than the writers of the New Wave school and its successors, or less sophisticated, or less skilled, or less accomplished at what they generally set out to do, but that the two sorts of science fiction do differ in terms of literary and commercial ambition.

It can generally be said that British New Wave science fiction and its spiritual and esthetic successors sought and still seek to break the genre bounds between "science fiction" and so-called "mainstream."

In marketing and commercial terms, this has meant trying to repackage the stuff as "speculative fiction" and conceiving of the potential readership as wider than that of the committed SF cognoscenti and therefore assuming no prior knowledge of the tropes, terminology, and givens of "SF" or "sci-fi" on their part. Science fiction that, while it doesn't exclude the in-group audience, is written with a care for people who ordinarily would not read "science fiction."

In literary terms, this more often than not means applying a broader palette of "mainstream," "experimental," and "literary" stylistic and formal technique to a more generally comprehensible panoply of science fictional material than might be found in the hard core of the genre

in order to reach a wider and more literarily sophisticated, if less scientifically and technologically and "science fictionally" sophisticated readership.

A few years ago, perhaps in reaction to this, yet paradoxically perhaps also as a part of it, there was a certain flowering of what has been called "post-modern space opera," also led by British writers, such as Colin Greenland

"Naïve" space opera, if you will, was basically science fiction set in space or worlds other than Earth, written, as opposed to "hard science fiction" on the other extreme, in blissful disregard or plain ignorance of the laws of mass and energy and in many case of the actual physical conditions pertaining in "outer space" or the planets in question.

Post-modern space opera, on the other hand, takes the same sort of astronomic, scientific, and technological liberties and then some in the service of story, but knowingly, the attitude being, "Frankly, Scarlett, I don't give a damn!"

The writer of post-modern space opera does not really believe that Venus is a world of dinosaurian infested swamps or Mars is criss-crossed by the canals of a decaying civilization, and does not expect the reader to be an ignoramus either. The attitude is, if I want swamps on my Venus, I'll have swamps on my Venus! If I want Martian canals, I'll have them too! This is, after all, fiction, and, chez Vonnegut, all fiction is lies. Fair enough, as long as you know it's lies.

This sort of stuff more often than not deliberately lays it on with a trowel, the point being to openly acknowledge that this is not intended as mimetic realism or "science fiction" in any traditionally rigorous sense, but fantasy; a literary construct, pure if not so simple.

That's what makes post-modern space opera post-modern, and it is that post-modernity that makes it, paradoxically, at least, a distant cousin of the "New Wave" or "speculative fiction." The later also often takes a similar post-modern stance in terms of eschewing the "transparency" of style and form and scientific mimesis adopted by traditional science fiction in order to suspend disbelief in favor of openly admitting that what is being presented is, after all, a literary construct and therefore no such belief on the part of the reader is required.

But now, when American genre "SF" publishing has become overwhelmingly dominated by fantasy, and, with some significant exceptions, most American writers who seek to publish literarily, psychologically, and philosophically serious science fiction are of necessity trying to snake-dance out of the genre straightjacket in the direction of "mainstream," there seems to be an emerging counter-trend in Anglophone science fiction, coming mostly but not entirely out of Britain, Australia, Canada, and Northern Ireland

Namely a renaissance of, well, traditional science fiction—science fiction that does not seek to be anything other than the best science fiction it can be, but nothing less either. If it wasn't so ridiculous a term, I'd call it "post-post-modern" science fiction. As it is, I don't really know what to call it, except perhaps "sophisticated mainstream science fiction."

Take Paradox and Context, "books one and two of the Nulapeiron Sequence" by John Meaney. That I am reviewing the first two books of a trilogy, and without even seeing the third, given my well-known aversion to novel series, is exceptional as far as I'm concerned, but the Nulapeiron Sequence is exemplary of what I'm talking about here.

Meaney is, yes, British, and the whole three novel sequence, the third being called Resolution, and let us hope it is, had already been published to some significant acclaim by a major established British SF imprint, starting with, so it would seem by the copyright of the first book, Paradox, in 2000.

But Paradox was not published in the United States until 2005, five years later, and not by a major established American SF imprint, a clear example of the current unfortunate transatlantic disconnect, but by a new start-up called Pyr. As, I find, are all the books herein considered, and not by happenstance either, about which more later.

Nulapeiron is a large planet out there somewhere colonized by humans centuries ago. It would seem to have a toxic (to humans) atmosphere, for the humans inhabit not the surface, but vast and deep interconnected caves, caverns, corridors, and warrens whose breathable atmosphere must be provided by a fungus genetically engineered to do so.

Humans have also been on Nulapeiron long enough to have evolved, or devolved, an elaborate and elaborately stifling neo-feudal culture. The planet is divided up into "domains," feudal fiefs. Each fief consists of multiple levels of stratified caverns, and the physical stratification mirrors and determines a rigid class structure. Only a Brit could or would create a dystopian class system like this.

The protagonist of the series is

one Tom Corcorigan, who starts at the near bottom of his fief's levels and class structure, rises slowly and stepwise to the top as "Lord Corcorigan," becomes a secret rebel against the system, then a not-so-secret rebel leader, then a fugitive, rises again, falls, flees, rises once more, and, I would suspect, finally succeeds in reforming or definitively overthrowing the system in Resolution, as yet unpublished in the United States, which I have not yet read.

But don't stop me if you've read this before, which you probably have, since in summary it is probably the plot and thematic framework of more space opera than not. Because I am about to contend that the Nulapeiron Sequence is not space opera at all, though the publisher has put a laudatory quote on the cover of Paradox contending that it is, but exactly the sort of stuff that I'm trying to avoid having to call "post-post-modern science fiction."

Okay, these novels would seem to have a protagonist and a plot straight out of naïve space opera or postmodern space opera, and ves, they're set primarily on a distant world colonized by humans a long time ago, and ves, the feudal society is all too familiar, and yes, there are plenty of combat sequences, indeed to excess, and yes, our hero is the mightiest of warriors.

However, while there is a great deal of what at first may seem like cavalier space opera pseudo-science-prescient seers, living vehicles of every sort, creatures seemingly concocted at the author's whim, and so forth-Meaney does make a serious attempt at giving it all at least science fictional credibility. Genetic engineering seems to be the dominant technology-why engineer transportation vehicles, atmosphere generating systems, and so forth, when you can breed them?and since Nulapeiron could not have been colonized without the genetically engineered fungus, this cultural technological dominance is credible. There is also a plausibly worked out futuristic mutation of the web and the internet and other hardware, as opposed to meatware technologies, so in toto the technosphere of the planet is quite three-dimensionally credible.

There is also a lot of very advanced futuristic physics underpinning the science, technology, prescience, and even the plot, underpinned in turn by mathematics too recondite for me to quite tell where the real cutting edge stuff grades into the necessary vaporware and bullshit. This, after all, is exactly where what I have elsewhere called "rubber science" is supposed to leave the reader within a piece of true "science fiction," postmodern or otherwise.

Further, early on in the first novel, young Tom comes into possession of an artifact that tells him tales from his deep past, which is to say our own relatively near future, which Meaney uses to intercut another story, namely that of how the far future set-up of Nulapeiron came to be. The two time-lines seem to slowly converge so that, I suspect, they will finally come together in Resolution.

Tom is given the thing by what Nulapeiron folk assume is a mythical creature, a Pilot; one of the humans cyborged to the FTL ships that colonized the planet long ago before some mysterious event somehow rendered such space travel impossible and Pilots supposedly ex-

And the story that Meaney intercuts with the main narrative, at least in the first two novels, is that of the events that caused such isolation, the physics and metaphysics behind it, told from the points of view of two generations of Pilots, mother and daughter, and, in contradistinction to the doings on farfuture Nulapeiron, with science rather less rubbery, and in a time and in places at least initially not that distant from our own.

Thus Meaney is attempting, and, as far as I have read thus far, succeeding, in doing what space opera by any meaningful definition never attempts. He seeks, at least in terms of literary effect, to seamlessly connect the reality of his far future with

that of the readers.

My contention—or definition, if you like—is that fiction that does this, or even has the ambition to do this, cannot be space opera. This is full-bore science fiction, not self-consciously fantasy or a pure literary construct.

Further—and this is something space opera can do but seldom does—at least as presented in the first two novels, Tom Corcorigan is a flawed here.

One arm has been chopped off as punishment by the powers that be, making him a physically flawed hero. This is rendered more psychologically and practically significant because a central part of his heroic powers is that he is a crackerjack martial artist despite, or possibly because of this. Martial arts combat of any number of schools forms a large part of Meaney's action—a bit too much for my taste, becoming obsessional not only on the part of his character but on the part of the author.

More importantly, Tom is a psychologically flawed hero. In the white heat of combat he does kill without hesitation and under extremes of torture degenerates into a subhuman killing machine. But he is agonized by his own acts and mistakes, rather than being a simple good-guy with an authorial license to consciencelessly kill, to the point where he spends quite a bit of time as a drunken derelitt.

Thus what we (in the US) have here is two novels of a three novel sequence that attempts to be both literarily and thematically quite sophisticated and mimetic, unlike space opera, without being anything more or less than science fiction period, and for my money succeeds.

But commercially speaking, the chances of the novels of the Nulapeiron cycle "breaking out" of the SF genre marketing parameters and numbers limitations, certainly in the United States, and almost certainly elsewhere, are zero. Not because of any lack of skill or sophistication, but because no one not at least passingly familiar with the literature of science fiction is likely to be able to read them with full comprehension and therefore enjoyment on the levelth author intends.

literary product fails or that the general readership that can't possibly fully comprehend science fiction written on this level is stupid, but that this is science fiction for people who read science fiction, period. Fiction that can only be really be enjoyed by such readers. Fiction that chooses to address a deliberately

limited audience. Elite fiction of its

own kind, as surely as Ulysses or

This is not to say that this sort of

Finnegan's Wake.

There, I've said it. And I will go further and say that there's nothing inherently wrong with this if one chooses to write such fiction with no commercial illusions. Certain things simply cannot be properly written for a general audience. I knew this and accepted it myself when I wrote The Void Captain's Tale and Riding the Torch, for example, and unless he was smoking much stronger stuff that I was at the time, I'm sure John Meaney knew and accepted it too. There are stories you must write for a limited well-educated audience or not at all.

This is the sort of thing I've been reduced to calling "post post-modern science fiction." It would be easy enough to simply call it "classical science fiction" or even just science fiction, period, if this kind of thing hadn't seemed to be on the way out in the US to the point where its literary renaissance out of Britain and Australia seem to be some kind of brave and perhaps quixotic countertrend deserving of some sort of label.

"Science fiction written specifically for experienced and intelligent readers of science fiction" is not exactly a sexy logo like New Wave or post-modern space opera or cyberpunk, but it is precisely what I'm talking about. And the readership for it is pretty precisely self-selected and limited too.

The question is, is that readership large enough for such literature to

survive commercially?

The major established science fiction lines generally appear to think not. Pyr, on the other hand, seems to aggressively believe it is, perhaps because its definition of commercial survival is more modest and realistic. Which is why all the novels considered in this essay have been published by Pyr, since Pyr seems to be specializing in such stuff, which also seems to be a main reason why they are publishing so many non-American writers, unlike the major American SF lines.

At first glance, Pyr seems to be a

small press, indeed a small SF specialty press, meaning a low capitalization, minuscule print run start-up whose distribution is the dwindling number of independent SF specialty stores, a wing, and a prayer. However, Pyr is an imprint of Prometheus Books, an independent non-fiction publisher that has been around for over thirty years, during which it has established distribution access to the chains and major independent book stores. So Pyr, while it may function as a small specialty press on the acquisition end, has a leg up on the rest of them when it comes to distribution.

If a publisher like Tor can get out five thousand copies of a mid-list SF hardcover, maybe something like Pyr can do it too, and do say a thirtyfive hundred copy sell-through, which would seem to be about an average percentage these days, neither a disaster nor a great success. At twenty-five dollars a copy, that earns out an advance of \$8750 for the writer, more than Pvr is probably fronting, and maybe they do a trade paperback later, and who knows, occasionally sell mass market rights.

The point of doing these numbers is that if Pyr's editorial selection and distribution processes work in a nominal but not exceptional manner, they can run at a decent profit while being competitive with the established so-called major SF lines, at least when it comes to mid-list. And writers thereof will do no worse by going their route either.

The bad news is that what this proves is that so-called mid-list SF writers have as much of a chance of earning a tough hard-working livelihood published by an outfit like this as they do of doing the same being published in a so-called major SF line.

The good news is the literary strategy being employed by Pyr's editor, Lou Anders, in taking advantage of the bad news. Anders, emphatically unlike the majors, has been opting for trying to maintain a consistently high level of literary quality. What Pyr has begun to publish, and yes, thus far fairly consistently, is the aforementioned science fiction written specifically for experienced and intelligent readers of science fiction, with a bit of fantasy more or less in the same mode thrown in.

Literary idealism, but also cunning commercial cherry-picking. What Anders seems to have realized, what the Pyr business model seems to reflect, is that this sort of elite science fiction does have an inherently limited readership, that such novels are not about to "break out," any more than the uneven midlist sci-fi persiflage churned out by

the majors.

Surprisingly enough, there is now a lot of such high quality science fiction available for average advances under ten thousand dollars, maybe well under. Therefore, unless such a publisher as Pyr (or for that matter most of the so-called majors if they would get the point) is really incompetent, if it accepts the demographic limitations, it can run quite nicely at a profit publishing nothing but such down-the-middle science fiction of literary quality.

Given good literary taste, it's a nobrainer. There are scores, perhaps hundreds, of high quality, even classic, science fiction novels by wellknown writers living and dead laying around out of print that you can pick up for relative peanuts. And is there any reason you have to package them as Golden Oldies? At these advance levels, there is really no economic excuse for publishing lowgrade filler even in the mid-list of a major, especially since it isn't going to sell any better than the right stuff anyway.

And these days there are all too many science fiction novels of literary quality being published in English outside the United States by writers unknown and unpublished in America begging to be published in the US with apparently no major takers, and therefore in no position to bargain for budget-busting bucks. Another reason, it would seem, why a disproportionate number of the early novels on the Pyr list are of non-American origin.

Another of these books is The Affinity Trap by Martin Sketchley, another British writer, and yes, billed as Book One of the Structure Series. This novel was published as a trade paperback original, perhaps because its prior publication in Britain may have been in that form, making a later American hardcover commercially unviable.

This is another science fiction novel of literary quality that hasn't a real prayer of being marketed to or read with comprehending enjoyment by any but an experienced and sophisticated audience of science fiction readers—though it does partake of some of the attributes of space opera, and the sub-genre, if you want to call it that, of so-called military science fiction.

Around the turn of the twentyfourth century, most of the population of Earth has retreated into enormous habitats reminiscent of Robert Silverberg's The World Inside, but the novel doesn't much concern itself with what goes on inside them.

The Earth has been taken over by a nasty, corrupt, bureaucratic military dictatorship, more banana republic writ large and high-tech than efficiently fascist, though utterly fascist economically, run in an amoral fashion by a generalissimo named Myson for the greedy profit of himself and his cronies.

The hero-or, better, protagonistof The Affinity Trap is Alexander Delgado, commando killer and military intelligence agent par excellence. As the novel opens, though, his career is somewhat in decline, having been too closely identified with the fortunes of the previous generalissimo overthrown by Myson. Thus does Sketchlev introduce Delgado as a man who has been a dedicated soldier with some idealism, but dedicated to the previous regime, wishing to redeem his position with the current one, though viewing it as degenerate and Myson a monster. It is a well-rendered set-up for a classic piece of jaundiced viewpoint military SF in the mode of Chris Bunch and Alan Cole's Sten series

But Sketchley's fictional universe is an interstellar one with any number of methods of interstellar travel. any number of alien races off camera in The Affinity Trap, and the Structure, the term for Earth's military-industrial-trading kleptocracy, doing dirty business with and/or against any number of them at any given time, and engaged one way or another in any number of crummy little colonial wars for and against aliens and human colonials.

Tension is currently high between the Structure and the Seriatt, a race of three-sexed aliens, and Myson concocts a ploy straight out of medieval Europe to father a child on Lycern. the "child-bearer to the royal household," in order to cement diplomatic relations and maybe even an alliance. But Lycern splits to the encampment of the Affinity Group on a

third planet, a kind of human religious nut-cult-cum-nascent hive mind, and Delgado is given the chance to save his endangered ass by bringing her back to Earth or else.

So it's a very complex geopolitical mess out there in outer space. The McGuffin involves a scientifically exceedingly unlikely act of inter-species reproductive sex, our intrepid hero is dropped down on a hostile planet to fetch the alien princess, and it seems like a set-up for a classic piece of post-modern space opera.

Delgado snatches Lycern, but in the process ends up involved in a bizarre sexual affair with the alien "princess," that addicts him to her sexually, biochemically, and psychologically; an addiction which he loathes, struggles against, and that stepwise changes his lovalties. moral compass, and personality.

There's a long sequence in a huge resort space habitat on the way back to Earth. Without going into the details, Delgado ends up with a little rag-tag guerilla group in the ruins surrounding the habitats fighting Myson and the Structure. The novel ends with an action sequence in which Delgado and his comrades attempt to snatch Lycern away from Myson and his minions.

How the novel ends. I won't even hint at for fear of ruining the bravura effect, except to say that it knocked my socks off, left my jaw gaping open, turned what was billed as the first novel of a series into something that stands entirely on its own, and left me wondering what in hell the next novel in the series could possibly be.

If the above plot description gives the impression that The Affinity Trap is a disjointed smorgasbord of science fictional schtick-space opera, military science fiction, anthropological science fiction, sexual science fiction a la Philip José Farmer, rebel-against-the-system science fiction—well, on a surface level it is. The military technology is well worked out and coherent and so is the space resort, but the FTL stuff and particularly the human-alien sex and reproduction is not to be taken seriously on any but the pure story level.

Nevertheless, The Affinity Trap coheres on a literary level because, at its core, it is a political and psychological novel, always focused and centered on the evolution and/or devolution of Delgado's loyalties, moral structure, character, and essential consciousness. At its heart, this is a novel of character, bouncing around from one level of rigor to another on an external phenomenological level, but always believable, interesting, and realistic on a psychological level.

Another science fiction novel of high literary quality, an adult novel of character even, with no chance at all of being enjoyed and compre-

hended by other than the sophisticated and experienced reader of science fiction. Another worthy novel whose commercial sales potential is entirely contained within those limited demographics.

And I'm not talking about the science fiction readership the major science fiction lines are addressing with so much stuff targeted at the so-called "fan base." That's a different, though also limited, science fiction readership from the one I've been talking about, though there is some overlan.

Some of those less sophisticated science fiction readers can and will read science fiction written for a sophisticated and intelligent readership likewise familiar with science fiction when, like Context, Paradox, and The Affinity Trap, it pushes their science fictional buttons too, and some of them will have their literary tastes widened and deepened thereby.

But I doubt that many of them will likely read something like Michael Blumlein's novel The Heal-

## CUSTOMER SERVICE OR SUBSCRIBER ASSISTANCE

Please direct all changes of address and subscription questions to:



ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION
6 Prowitt Street,
Norwalk, CT 06855

er with much enthusiasm and enjoyment.

This is another worthy science fiction novel—well, sort of—published by Pyr, but this time it's the novel's first publication anywhere, and the author is not only an American, but an American who has previously been published in a major American SF line.

But under the current conditions, one can see why an established major SF line would not be likely to publish something like *The Healer*. Blumlein is a doctor, and even puts the "MD" after his name on the cover as if it were a license plate. Which might be taken for a rather silly affectation were not *The Healer* a novel about a doctor, or anyway a, well, healer.

Where or when (or both) the story takes place seems impossible to ascertain from the text. Another planet? A far future Earth? The overwhelming majority of the population is human, but there is a significant minority of mutant Grotesques, most of whom are simply grotesque, a few of whom, like Payne, the protagonist, are healers.

Healers have an orifice-like organ on their torsos called the os melior that enables them to sort of bodymeld with ill humans, draw the disease out of the patient's body like the "bad vapors" of pre-allopathic medical theory, and concretize them into a strange sort of semi-creature that they excrete, thus effecting the

cure.

Science fiction? Fantasy?

Blumlein has invented and elaborated in convincing fictional detail an alternate healing science not only unlike any contemporary or past school of medicine, but whose internal logic holds up quite well on a literary level, even though it makes no

sense at all in terms of what science knows of mammalian, bacterial, and viral biology.

Easy enough therefore to call The Healer "science fiction" if one takes the venue for a far future Earth with mutated biology or another planet with inhabitants who are somehow "human," a common enough science fictional convention, or just as easy to call it fantasy.

Who really cares? Blumlein doesn't seem to. His fictional healing process works like rubber science, not magic. I would contend, not that I feel particularly contentious about it, that this is post-modern science fiction in the manner of post-modern space opera.

Blumlein, like writers of postmodern space opera, knows that The Healer violates known science as surely as the Swamps of Venus or the Canals of Mars—he is a physician, after all—but, like them, doesn't give a damn. Like the writers of postmodern space opera, he's quite willing to jettison verisimilitude, science, even the science of his own profession, in order to tell his story.

The difference, and in commercial terms as well as literary terms it is an enormous difference, is the nature and intent of the story. Whereas post-modern space opera, like naïve space opera, is out to tell a ripping adventure yarn, in *The Healer* Blumlein is out to tell a very interior, indeed somewhat claustrophobic, character-centered story.

Who does and who does not become a healer is genetically determined, and the culture depicted allows them no choice in the matter; they are in effect drafted, and drafted for life. And that life is a shortend one, for the healing process burns them out and kills them at an early age. And since Grotesques are an underclass despised or, at best, grudgingly tolerated by the dominant humans, healers, being Grotesques, are neither richly rewarded nor respected in the manner of doctors in our society. No human mother in Blumlein's fictional reality would aspire to have her daughter marry one.

Thus Payne's story is that of somehing of a social isolate, who generally fails to break out of his social isolation, and is not very good at human (in the broadest sense) relationships; a professional empath, whose empathy exists mainly on a professional level, as perhaps deliberately symbolized by the manner of the healing, as he cures diseases caused by immaterial agencies by converting them into concrete material aggregations to be excreted.

Has Michael Blumlein, MD, deliberately written a kind of science fictional meditation on the inner lives of doctors in our own society? Is there something psychically autobiographical here? Maybe. Certainly appending his MD to his author credit seem like an invitation to take The Healer that way, else why do it in the first place? But be that as it may, that's where literary criticism starts to drift off into speculative psychoanalysis of the author, and that's a direction in which I choose to go no further.

My point for present purposes is that The Healer is a very deep and very interesting and very interior meditation on what it is to be a healer—not to choose to be one, but to be chosen, to be able to heal others but not oneself or one's colleagues, to pay a heavy price in psychic terms and in terms of lifespan—but interesting only to a readership interested in such stuff, which is not likely to be a large one.

Certainly smaller than the potential readership for space opera, postmodern or otherwise, smaller even than the more restricted readership for science fiction written for sophisticated and knowledgeable readers thereof in general. Which is to say smaller than the potential market for novels like the Nulapeiron Sequence or The Affinity Trap.

And yet, though the major established SF lines hardly ever publish anything promising only numbers like that anymore, Pyr has chosen to publish it, calculating, and I think correctly, that there are still enough potential readers even for something like The Healer to turn an acceptable profit on realistically modest terms.

What all this means to the writers laboring within the aforementioned commercial parameters is a true existential question that cuts to the heart of what one writes at any given time and why.

Under the present commercial conditions, science fiction of the sort reviewed and lauded herein is just not going to "break out" of its limited readership, nor, therefore, is it going to "break out" of its circumscribed economic potential. Indeed, this may be, maybe have always been, and may always be, inherent in the nature of the material itself. No one is going to make anything beyond a tough hard-scrabble living writing science fiction for sophisticated and knowledgeable readers exclusively.

Does that mean it is not worth writing?

I would contend, and have hopefully thus far demonstrated that such fiction is certainly worth reading for those equipped to read it with the necessary level of knowledge and commitment. Indeed, for

such readers it may be the fiction of choice.

Whether it's worth writing for practitioners without illusions is a personal choice, perhaps a choice that one makes from book to book. It know that I have. In absolute literary terms, the sincere writer really writes for a readership of one. You write what you would like someone else to have written so you could read it.

I like to read the sort of fiction I've been discussing here, so I've written it from time to time; early on perhaps with unrealistic stars in my eyes, later without commercial illusions. But I have other literary interests, too. I not only wish to reach larger readership for certain of my works, but wish to acquaint them with something of the spirit of speculative fiction, too. And so I have no problem writing contemporary fiction, historical fiction, "cross-over fiction," whatever, with the same literary sincerity.

But accepting a limited elite audience for a particular work sometimes has a strong attraction for a writer, for it liberates you to write certain things that you know damn well can't be read with comprehending enjoyment by anyone else.

Of course the economic attraction is not much beyond bare survival. Still, if something like Pyr succeeds and is emulated by more such publishing programs, and the numbers say given competence such a business and literary model should work, it will be possible to earn something like a survival living writing only such fiction for those with the necessary talent who can write quickly enough or a nice supplement for those not fast enough to give up their day job.

That much being said, it is still de-

pressing when something like *The Resurrected Man* by Sean Williams, which should have been published in a major way by a major SF line at the very least must be rescued from American limbo by a specialty imprint like Pyr.

Williams is an Australian who has apparently published eighteen novels there, The Resurrected Man was first published in Australia way back in 1998, and is one of those comparatively rare novels that both fulfill the parameters of full-bore science fiction yet could be read by a "cross-over" audience as easily as the science fiction of Michael Crichton or Margaret Atwood to which it is quite superior on all levels.

The Resurrected Man is a murder mystery of a science fictional sort, of the hard-boiled private dick variety thereof, and the cyberpunk variant of that. Jonah McEwan, once a cop, now a private eye, must solve the murder of his one-time partner and lover Marylin Blaylock.

Well, not really. In this future, matter transmission is the major form of transportation of goods and humans, and the process can produce duplicates of the originals who don't even necessarily know they're duplicates, and what's really going on is that a serial killer is duplicating women who look like Marylin and murdering them. And since their partnership and relationship ended badly, Jonah himself is the prime suspect. The original Marylin, still alive and now a cop, ends up somewhat reluctantly partnering with him again to solve the serial murders of women who seem to be surrogates for herself.

Thus we have a story-line that would pull readers of thrillers or detective novels through what is otherwise a very well written and very well extrapolated science fiction novel set in a very complex and well-realized future, moreover written with the considerable style, panache, and attention to the inner life of the detective in question that one has come to expect in high-end noir.

The Resurrected Man is hardly the first novel to mix the detective story with science fiction in an attempt to appeal to the readerships for both, but most of them water down the science fiction elements for the sake of the detective novel readers, and tone down the noir concentration on the inner life of the main character for the science fiction readers, and the whole usually ends up less than the sum of its parts.

Here, though, the whole succeeds in being greater than the sum of its parts. It's impossible for me to have read The Resurrected Man as if I were ignorant of science fiction, but I do believe that there are readers of noir detective novels who are will be able to comprehend the science fiction, and I am sure that the science fiction readers will not feel talked

down to.

So why was The Resurrected Man not picked up by a major American publisher during the seven years between its publication in Australia and its rescue from Stateside obliv-

ion by Pyr?

True, getting something like this published as a "major mainstream novel" has always been problematical in the United States, and though it has worked very well in France with things like Maurice Dantec's Les Racines Du Mal, publishing something like The Resurrected Man as a major mystery novel is rare in the United States because, aside from the main character and the plot, this is dominantly science fiction.

But what makes a mystery a mystery is the lead character and the plot and nothing more, which is why anyone can read one readily without having read in the genre before. And what makes science fiction science fiction has nothing to do with the plot and the lead character.

So there's nothing in The Resurrected Man that would have distanced the book from science fiction readers, and quite a bit that would have drawn in an additional audience from detective novel readers had it been published in the United States with a bit of push and savvy.

Therefore given that under the present conditions the acquisition cost would have been modest, it would seem that The Resurrected Man would have been an ideal novel for a major American SF line to place a modest bet on at breaking out of the singular genre marketing

So speaking of mysteries, why didn't one of them do it?

Speaking of hard-boiled literary detectives, why wasn't there one with the publishing street smarts to try? O

Norman Spinrad tells us "I have begun a 'radical experiment,' the 'viral shareware distribution' of my novel He Walked Among Us. The entire novel is available as shareware upon request as an RTF file, to individuals who are permitted and encouraged to redistribute it, and to web zines and news groups who are permitted to post it on a non-exclusive basis. To request a copy of the He Walked Among Us file, email me at normanspinrad@ compuserve.com."



## BURYING MAUD

(MOCK FIRESIDE LAMENT)

With apologies to John Greenleaf Whittier

Avaunt, avaunt ye monstruous dog! Oh, do not frisk and play! The ground has gotten hard and we Must bury Maud today.

With shovel, chisel, axe and pick We've worked to dig the hole To put her ample body in That will not hold her soul.

The ground is adamantine And chill has gone to cold And Maud has gone to Glory But eighty-nine years old.

Oh hard, and hard, and harder yet The adamantine ground, We've filled her mouth with frozen dirt Till she can't make a sound.

The frost is on the pumpkin And leaden are the skies Alas we do not have the time To wait until she dies.

-William John Watkins

## SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Its time to think about what to do over the big Easter convention weekend. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, antiests, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, into on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-adchressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newart NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999 if a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out Look for me at cons behind the Filtry Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

#### MARCH 2006

- 11—12—PhoenixCon. For into, write: Yellow Brick Road, 8 Bachelor's Walk Dublin 1, Ireland. Or phone: (973) 242-5999
  (10 w. to 10 nu, not collect). (Web) alvobooks.com. (E-mail) phoenixconvention by phoe.com.uk. Con will be held in:
  Dublin. Ireland fit on omitted. same as in addressal after Ashing Hotel. Glass will include. Science. (Science. Generalized).
- 15-19-IAFA, lafa.org. Airport Wyndham, Pt. Lauderdale FL. C. Vess, Inge, Goonan, B. Aldiss. Academic conference.
- 16-19-Left Coast Crime, interbridge.com, Marriott, Bristol UK, Anne Perry, Lee Child, T. & B. Gottfried, D. Moore,
- 17-19-LunaCon, lunacon.org, Sheraton, E. Rutherford NJ (near NYC), J. Butcher, D. Mattingly, B. Connell, Ashton.
- 17–19—RevelCon. majorcrimes.freeservers.com/revelcon. Houston TX. Media-oriented fanzine relax-a-con. 18+ only.
- 24–26—ICon, Box 550, Story Brook NY 11790, iconsf.org. State U. of NY. Brooks, Emshwiller. Big on-campus con.
- 24-20-roun, Box 550, Storry Brook NY 11790. Idonistiong. State 0. 01 NY. Brooks, Erishwitel. Big Orroan pos con
- 24-26—ChimaeraCon, 138 Av. Del Rey #G, San Antonio TX 78216. chimaeracon.com. Trishway Hall. Gaming, anime. 24-26—SakuraCon, 3702 S. Fife. Suite K-2 #78. Tacoma WA 98409, sakuracon.oru. Ikue Otani & others. Anime.
- ET EO CONCRETE OF THE CONTROL OF THE STATE OF THE CONTROL OF THE C
- 31-Apr. 2—PortmeiriCon, 90871 Clover Dr., N. Wales PA 19454. portmeiricon.com. At UK "Prisoner" location.

#### 31–Apr. 2—TellyNation, 163 Park Rd., Loughborough LE11 2HE, UK. tellynation.com. Hilton, Swindon. Matthews. APRIL 2006

- 13-16-NorWesCon, Box 68547, Seattle WA 98168. (206) 270-7850. norwescon.org. Doubletree, SeaTac WA. Bujoki.
- 13-16-FroliCon, Box 4880, Huntsville AL 35815, frolicon.org. Crowne Plaza, Atlanta GA. Over 18 only.
- 13-16---EuroCon, Box 570/8, Kiev 03126, Ukraine. (380-44) 455-3575. eurocon.kiev.ua. Poyarkov, Datlow, E. Gunn.
- 14-16-MiniCon, Box 8297, Minneapolis MN 55406. mnstf.org. Sheraton Bloomington South. Ellison, Friauf, Picacio.
- 14-16—AniZona, c/o Box 62613, Phoenix AZ 85082. (602) 375-1777. anizona.org. Embassy Suites North. Anime con.
- 14-17-UK National Con, Box 64128, Sunnyvale CA 94088. (650) 722-1413. eastercon2006.org. Glasgow Scotland.
- 21–23—EerieCon, Box 412, Buffalo NY 14226. info@eeriecon.org. Days Inn, Niagara Falls NY. Turtledove, Huff.
- 21–23—RavenCon, 8600 Queensmere Pl. #2, Richmond VA 23294. ravencon.com. T. Brooks, T. Kidd, the Gillilands.
- 21–23—PenguiCon, Box 401302, Redford MI 48240. penguicon.org. Sheraton, Novi MI. Open-source software & SF.
- 21-23-Malice Domestic, 703 Kenbrook Dr., Silver Spring MD 20902. malicedomestic.org. Arlington VA. Mysteries.
- 28-30-ShiokazeCon, Box 75101, Houston TX 77234. shiokazecon.com. Anime.
- 28-30-OLNFC, 22 Purefoy Rd., Coventry CV3 5GL, UK. theofficialleonardnimoyfanclub.com. Learnington Spa.

#### MAY 2006

- 4-7-Nebula Awards Weekend, c/o SFWA, Box 877, Chestertown MD 21620. (480) 423-0649. sfwa.org. Tempe AZ.
- 5-7—LepreCon, Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85285. (480) 945-6890. leprecon.org. Embassy Suites N., Phoenix AZ. Clark.

  AUGUST 12006

#### 23–27—LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. Imto@tacontv.com. Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. The WorldCon. \$175 AUGUST 2007

2-5-Archon, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. archonstl.org. Collinsville IL. North American SF Convention for 2007.

30-Sep. 3-Nippon 2007, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. nippon 2007.org, Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. \$180.

## **CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE**

Asimov's April/May '06

Advertise in the world's leading science fiction magazines with our Asimov's/Analog combined classified section. Ad rates per issue: 52.95 per word (10 word minimum), \$125 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). SPECIAL INTRODUCTORY OFFER: Buy two ads and receive a third ad FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, 475 Park Ave. S., 11th Floor, New York, NY 10016. Direct inquires to: (212) 666-7188, Fax (212) 686-7414 or email: adsless@dellmagazines.com

#### **ANNOUCEMENTS**

Balticon 40 - Maryland Regional Science Fiction Convention. May 26-29, 2006. Neil Gaiman, Gene Wolfe, and more, 300 hours of programming. Info www.balticon.org or PO Box 686, Baltimore, MD 21203

#### **BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS**

**BOUNCING WORLDS.** Astronauts, Cowboys, Hippies, Kings, Leprechauns, Poets, Angels. Explore the worlds at www.caterpillarpress.com

BUYING SCIENCE FICTION magazines, book collections. Will travel for large accumulations. Bowman, Box 167, Carmel, IN 46082.

#### BOOKS/PUBLICATIONS

ENEMY MINE, All books in print, Check: www.barryblongyear.com

PUBLISH YOUR BOOK ONLINE, Third Millennium Publishing, a cooperative of online writers and resources, http://3mpub.com

SciFi Writers: Show publishers your work at www.kleinpublishing.com/scifi.htm

The universe has a great secret. Read Life Everlasting. Visit henryblanchard.com

#### **ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION**

Classified Department 475 Park Ave South, 11th Floor New York, NY 10016 Call: (212) 686-7188 Fax: (212) 686-7414 adsales@dellmagazines.com

CLASSIFIED - 23

## NEXT ISSUE

JUNE

Hugo Award-winner James Patrick Kelly has been featured in every June issue of Asimov's for more than twenty years now, and doesn't let us down this year either, returning next issue with our lead story for June, taking us "backstage" for an insider's look at the problems, pitfalls, and bizarre (and sometimes potentially deadly) complications of putting on the high-tech interactive entertainment of the future, "The Leila Torn Show," all told from a unique perspective—that of the show itself!

ALSO IN JUNE Popular new writer Jack Skillingstead demonstrates that when you've only got one day, you'd better make it a good one, as he plunges us headlong into "Life on the Preservation"; new writer Beth Bernobich. making her Asimov's debut, unravels a sinister mathematical mystery as she flies with "A Flight of Numbers Fantastique Strange"; Robert Reed, one of our most prolific contributors, returns to delve into the secrets of the strangest show you never saw, as he examines "Eight Episodes": well-known writer and scientist Rudy Rucker institutes drastic solutions for drastic problems, and we end up all having to deal with the consequences, along with "Chu and the Nants"; new writer Scott William Carter, making his Asimov's debut, takes us to a distant planet for a chilling encounter with "The Tiger in the Garden": British writer lan Creasey takes us on a suspenserul hunt for those strange things that live beyond "The Edge of the Map"; and new writer William Preston, making his Asimov's debut, assures us that "You Will Go to the Moon"-whether it's the right thing to do or not.

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column muses about "Sixtus the Sixth"; Peter Heck brings us "On Books"; and, James Patrick Kelly's "On the Net" column invites us to perk up our ears for some "Adventures in Podcasting"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our June issue on sale at your newsstand on April 11, 2006. Or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you this year (you can also subscribe to Asimov's online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, www.asimovs.com).

COMING

medulla-masticating tales by Rudy Rucker, William Barton, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Nancy Kress, Kathe Koja, Carol Emshwiller, Robert Silverberg, Alexander Jablokov, Michael Swanwick, Tanith Lee, Brian Stableford, Stephen Baxter, Tim Pratt, Bruce McAllister, Paul Melko, Pamela Sargent, L. Timmel Duchamp, and many more!

## Past and present entangle...and threaten the future.

The crew of the U.S.S. Voyager™ is caught in a maelstrom of destruction rooted in the universe's very beginnings... and which may bring about its end.



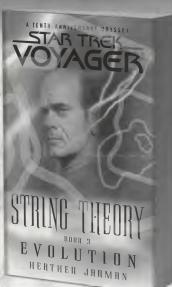




Published by Pocket Books A Division of Simon & Schuster A Viacom Company www.simonsavs.com www.startrek.com

Also available as an eRook

M. (ii), & (iii) 2006 Paramount Pictures, All Rights Reserved, STAR TREK and related marks are trademarks of Paramount Pictures, Pocket Books Authorized User



# Explore the Universe!

Visit www.analogsf.com & www.asimovs.com

Home of the world's leading Science Fiction magazines.



### Log on and enjoy:

- ☆ Award-nominated stories from the genre's leading authors
- 🖈 Readers' Forum
- ★ Excerpts of current stories
- ☆ Book reviews

www.asimovs.com

www.analogsf.com